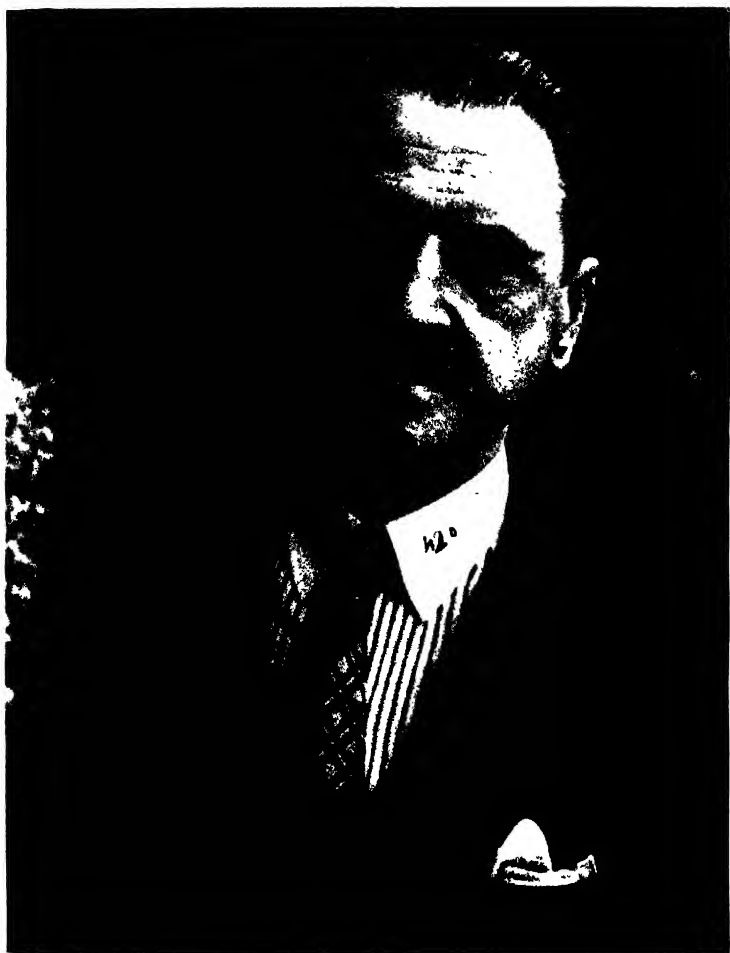


THE MAUGHAM  
ENIGMA

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W. Somerset Maugham

*(Photo: Carl Van Vechten)*

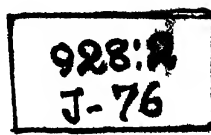
# THE MAUGHAM ENIGMA

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*an anthology edited*

*by*

KLAUS W. JONAS



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*London*

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# CONTENTS

	Page
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	7
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	11
<b>BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH</b>	15
<b>BIOGRAPHY</b>	
MAUGHAM AS I KNOW HIM	21
MR. MAUGHAM ON THE ESSENTIALS OF WRITING	37
HOW TO WRITE — BY MAUGHAM	41
THE PHILOSOPHER AS MAN OF LETTERS	50
<b>CRITICISM</b>	
THE EXOTICISM OF SOMERSET MAUGHAM	54
AN APPRECIATION	72
THEME AND VARIATIONS	84
<b>BOOK REVIEWS — (A) THE DRAMATIST</b>	
A PLAYWRIGHT WHO STUMBLED INTO FAME	101
SOMERSET MAUGHAM HIMSELF	104
OUR BETTERS	107
THE CONSTANT WIFE	111
<b>BOOK REVIEWS — (B) THE NOVELIST</b>	
AS A REALIST SEES IT	114
OF HUMAN BONDAGE	121
IN VISHNU-LAND WHAT AVITAR?	129
THE REALISM OF SOMERSET MAUGHAM	133
THOMAS HARDY VEILED	146
THE NARROW CORNER	149
THE TECHNICIAN	153
MAUGHAM AND THE TWO MYTHS	156
CATALINA	164
<b>BOOK REVIEWS — (C) TELLER OF TALES</b>	
SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S SHORT STORIES	167
THE TREMBLING OF A LEAF	171
AN AUTHOR IN EVENING DRESS	177
ANGRY AUTHOR'S COMPLAINT	180
THE MIXTURE AS BEFORE	185
<b>BOOK REVIEWS — (D) THE ESSAYIST AND AUTHOR OF TRAVEL BOOKS</b>	
MAUGHAM'S CHINESE SKETCHES	191
SPANISH GOLD	194
THE GENTLEMAN IN THE PARLOUR	197
THE MAUGHAM ENIGMA	200
AN EPICUREAN ON LIBERTY	205
MR. MAUGHAM'S WORKSHOP	208
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	213

To  
Lewis W. Douglas,  
former United States Ambassador  
to the Court of St. James.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The Editor of *The New York Times* has given his consent to reprint Miss Louise M. Field's review of *On a Chinese Screen* (February 4, 1923); Mr. Harry Gilroy's "How to write — by Maugham", (*New York Times Magazine* of January 23, 1949); Mr. Robert Van Gelder's article "Maugham on the Essentials of Writing" (November 24, 1940); and Mr. Orville Prescott's review of *Catalina* (October 26, 1948). I am grateful to these authors for their generous assistance and permission to use their articles in this anthology.

The Editor of *The Spectator* permitted me to reprint three articles, and their authors were most helpful in adding their own approval of my request: "Spanish Gold" by Graham

Greene, June 21, 1935; "The Technician", by Evelyn Waugh, February 17, 1939; and "Mr. Maugham's Workshop" by Charles Morgan, October 7, 1950.

I wish to acknowledge the kindness of the Editor of *College English*, Mr. Wilbur Hatfield, for his permission to reprint the essay by Professor Woodburn O. Ross of Wayne University, "W. Somerset Maugham: Theme and Variations", published in *The English Journal*, May 1947; and the appreciation by the late Professor Theodor Spencer of Harvard University from *College English*, October 1940. The copyright owners, Mrs. Theodore Spencer and Dr. Woodburn O. Ross, were very generous in joining Mr. Hatfield in this permission, and my thanks are due to them for their courteous assistance.

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Mr. David Paul permitted me to include his essay on "Maugham and Two Myths" in this anthology. It originally appeared in *The Cornhill* of autumn 1946.

Dr. Irwin Edman, Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy of Columbia University, was most helpful in authorizing the use of his address "The Philosopher as Man of Letters", delivered in New York on October 17, 1950, to which the National Institute of Arts and Letters has kindly added its

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Professor Karl G. Pfeiffer of New York University, who aided me when I was preparing my Maugham *Bibliography*, has again been most kind and helpful: Thanks to his permission and that of the Editor of *Redbook Magazine*, I am authorized to reprint his article "Maugham -- as I know him", which originally appeared in *Redbook*, May 1945.

Dr. Richard A. Cordell, Professor of English at Purdue University, has very graciously allowed me to use many sections of his important monograph on Somerset Maugham, for which I am most grateful to him.

I am fortunate in being able to add to these articles one piece by Mr. Maugham himself which he permitted me to reprint in this critical symposium: his address at the Library of Congress (April 29, 1946). It is with a feeling of deep gratitude that I thank Mr. Maugham for his never failing help and kindness.

The photograph of Mr. Maugham used as a frontispiece is by courtesy of Carl Van Vechten.

**"In my twenties the critics said I was brutal,  
In my thirties they said I was flippant,  
In my forties they said I was cynical,  
And in my fifties they said I was competent,  
And then in my sixties they said I was superficial.  
I have gone my own way, with a shrug of my shoulders,  
Following the path I have traced, trying with my work  
To fill out the pattern of life that I have made for Myself".**

**From W. Somerset Maugham's *The Summing Up*.**

**Reprinted by permission of William Heinemann Ltd.**

## INTRODUCTION

In 1926, Charles Hanson Towne, then Mr. Maugham's literary agent in the United States, edited a little pamphlet issued by George H. Doran. It contained a few critical articles on Mr. Maugham from American newspapers, excerpts from book reviews, and an amusing note by Mr. Maugham on the art of writing, in the form of letters addressed to the imaginary mother of an imaginary boy who wanted to write. These letters had first appeared in *The Bookman*, and in one of them Mr. Maugham advised his young friend to read one of his favourite novels, *The Tattooed Countess* by Carl Van Vechten. "He will find in it", said Maugham, "a model of form which alone makes the book a pleasure to read; and he will find also an enchanting humour. . . . It is a perfect example of perhaps the most difficult book to write: the light novel".

Towne's collection of articles was the first book of criticism about Mr. Maugham, and it seems characteristic that it should have appeared in the United States, which has since shown so much admiration and enthusiasm for his writings. The next country to produce critical books on him was France. In 1928 Paul Dottin, Professor of English at Toulouse University, issued his essay, *Somerset Maugham et ses romans*, which was followed in 1937 by a second book, *Le théâtre de Somerset Maugham*, while in 1933 Mme. Suzanne Guéry's study on *La Philosophie de Somerset Maugham* had been published. It was again in the thirties that American scholars turned their attention to Maugham: Claude S. McIver's doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, *W. Somerset Maugham: A Study of Technique and Literary Sources*, appeared in 1936, and in 1937 Professor Richard A. Cordell's monograph on Mr. Maugham was published. In the meantime English critics introduced Maugham to their fellow-countrymen: Desmond McCarthy's essay on *Maugham, the English Maupassant*, was issued in

1934 by W. Heinemann as a pamphlet; Richard H. Ward's book appeared in 1937, and in 1939, on the occasion of Maugham's sixty-fifth birthday, Richard Aldington's appreciation was published by Doubleday, Doran and Co. Since the thirties Mr. Maugham's work has also been given serious consideration on the Continent: in Germany, the first Ph.D. thesis about him was written by Gertrud Savini of Erlangen University and published in 1939; an interesting and revealing study of Maugham and psychoanalysis is to be found in the late Professor Reinold Hoops' book, *Der Einfluss der Psychoanalyse auf die Englische Literatur*. In the early years of World War II, Helmut Papajewski, now Professor of English at Cologne University, wrote a full-length critical study, *Die Welt-, Lebens- und Kunstanschauung William Somerset Maughams*. Of this excellent work the first chapter on "Die Weltanschauung" appeared in a scholarly periodical, *Anglia*, in 1944. In the summer of 1952 the complete study of this most outstanding European expert on Mr. Maugham, apart from Paul Dottin, was published in book form. It is to be hoped that an English translation of this deep and penetrating analysis of Maugham's works may soon be available. There are other countries in which ardent students have occupied themselves with Mr. Maugham's writings, such as Hungary and Mexico, which both produced scholarly books on this author, and in recent years more and more Ph.D. theses dealing with his work have been presented to European universities. The Universities of Graz in Austria, of Ghent in Belgium, and of Würzburg in Germany, have conferred in the past few years several doctor's degrees for dissertations about Mr. Maugham. More than twenty essays for the degree of Master of Arts have been accepted by American universities and colleges. So far, however, only typescripts of all these studies exist in the libraries of the respective universities.

The value of the numerous critical books on Mr. Maugham may vary considerably but there is one thing they all have



in common: with the exception of Papajewski's work they are all sold out to the last copy and are thus unavailable. And the same holds true of most of the essays which have appeared in periodicals both in this country and abroad. It is small wonder that many of Mr. Maugham's readers want to acquaint themselves with the personality and the philosophy of a man to whom they owe so many hours of pleasant entertainment. In order to make some of the best critical articles and book reviews again available to a larger audience, the editor has screened more than six hundred essays and reviews and finally selected twenty-nine in an attempt to present Mr. Maugham in the light of critical opinion. The earliest of these articles appeared in 1908, the last in 1950. Both enthusiastic appraisals and sharp but honest criticism have been included in this anthology.

The numerous authors whom the editor has approached have been most kind and helpful. For various reasons, the reader will not find all of the best essays on Mr. Maugham in this critical symposium. For instance, one of the excellent articles not to be found in this book is Glenway Wescott's *Introduction to the Maugham Reader* which was not yet available for reprint when this anthology was in preparation. For reasons of space it was not possible to include in this collection St. John Ervine's address on *The Plays of Somerset Maugham* which he read before the Royal Society of Literature in London on January 9, 1935.

It is my hope that *The Maugham Enigma* may contribute to a better understanding of Mr. Maugham and may lead his readers to form their own appraisal of what Glenway Wescott rightly calls "this great career and life-work".

K. W. J.

Rutgers University,  
New Brunswick, N.J.



## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

JONAS, Klaus W. Born in Stettin, Germany, 1920. Lecturer in German, Paris. Member of German Department, Mount Holyoke College, Mass., 1949-1950. Since 1950, Rutgers University. Founder and Curator of the Center of Maugham Studies. Publications: Articles and book reviews in various periodicals and newspapers, dealing with such contemporary authors as Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, R. M. Rilke, Franz Kafka, Somerset Maugham, and Sir Max Beer-bohm. Previous works on Maugham: *A Bibliography of the Writings of W. Somerset Maugham*, 1950; and *More Maughamiana*, 1950; and *Somerset Maugham and the Far Studies*; and *Carl Van Vechten: A Bibliographical Study*.

William Somerset Maugham was born in Paris on January 25, 1874. His family is of Irish origin. One of his forefathers migrated to Westmorland, and for centuries his ancestors lived as gentlemen farmers and local government officials. Robert Armand Maugham, the author's grandfather, was a distinguished barrister who had written extensively on legal subjects. He was one of the founders of the Incorporated Law Society and for many years editor and proprietor of the *Legal Observer*. Maugham's father, Robert Armand Jr., was a man of the world who, like his youngest son, enjoyed travel and books. After extensive trips to Asia Minor and Africa he was appointed, in 1850, Solicitor to the British Embassy in Paris, where he settled in the rue d'Antin. His beautiful wife, a woman of great cultivation, was twenty years his junior, completely devoted to him and his interests. Their acquaintances included statesmen, artists, writers, and among their friends they counted men like Prosper Mérimée and Gustave Doré. Maugham's eldest brother, Frederick, is also a lawyer: he has attained an eminent position as Chief Justice of England and, in 1935, was raised to the peerage.

In 1882, Mrs. Maugham died from tuberculosis, and two years later her husband succumbed to a cancer. William

Somerset, the youngest of six sons, was sent to live with an uncle, the Reverend Henry MacDonald Maugham, Vicar of Whitstable, and his German-born wife Sophie, daughter of Baron von Scheidlin. At thirteen he attended King's College, Canterbury, a small public school for gentlemen's sons, where he was bullied by the masters and his fellow students. In 1890 he contracted tuberculosis; following a cure in Southern France, he completed his secondary education. He was extremely unhappy, small, in poor health, shy, and afflicted with a bad stammer. Throughout his life the memories of the pleasant years in France, in the gay atmosphere of Paris, and of the miserable seven years in Kent have never left him. To the hero of his autobiographical novel *Of Human Bondage*, Philip Carey, he gave not a stammer but a clubfoot instead, but in a preface to *The Old Wives' Tale* he speaks of the suffering of those who, like himself, suffer from a stammer: "Everyone knows that Arnold was afflicted with a very bad stammer; it was painful to watch the struggle he had sometimes to get the words out. It was torture to him. Few realised the exhaustion it caused him to speak. What to most men was as easy as breathing, to him was a constant strain. It tore his nerves to pieces. Few knew the humiliation it exposed him to, the ridicule it excited in many, the impatience it aroused, the awkwardness of feeling that it made people find him tiresome; and the minor exasperation of thinking of a good, amusing or apt remark and not venturing to say it in case the stammer ruined it. Few knew the distressing sense it gave rise to of a bar to complete contact with other men. It may be that except for the stammer which forced him to introspection, Arnold would never have become a writer. But I think it not the least proof of his strong and sane character, that, notwithstanding this impediment, he was able to retain his splendid balance and regard the normal life of men from a normal point of view". (*Fifty Modern Writers*. New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co. 1933).

In 1891 Maugham went to Heidelberg, where he spent the

happiest year of his life. Though he was not officially registered as a student, he attended lectures in its old university, enjoying discussions on philosophy, poetry, religion and art. On his return to England he worked for some time in the office of a chartered accountant but having no taste for this type of work he entered St. Thomas's Hospital, a medical school established in the thirteenth century, where, after six years of study, he was qualified as a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians. Except for a year in the London slums as an interne, he never practised his profession. Instead he became what he had wanted most of all: to be a writer.

In 1897 he went to live for some time in Spain, where he filled his notebooks with material on the life of that country which resulted in his two books *Andalusia* and *Don Fernando*. In 1899 his first book of short stories, *Orientations*, was published. It seems characteristic that Maugham's lifelong love for Spain is reflected in his use of this country as the setting for his first and his last short stories: *Don Sebastian* and *The Point of Honour*.

In his first novel, *Lisa of Lambeth*, Maugham draws on his experiences as a medical student who had delivered sixty-two babies in the slums of London. *The St. Thomas' Hospital Gazette* of June, 1898, wrote about this book that it had achieved a great and well-deserved success: "It deals with one aspect of Lambeth life in a powerful and perhaps rather lurid way; the uncompromising vigour of both plot and style will appeal strongly to all lovers of realism. Mr. Maugham is to be congratulated on it; and we surmise and hope that we may have the opportunity of reading more of his work in the future".

In his first efforts as a dramatist Maugham was not successful; producer after producer refused to accept his plays, and therefore the drama critic of the *Saturday Review*, Max Beerbohm, advised him to abandon the theatre altogether. But Maugham was not easily discouraged. In 1904 he

returned to Paris, rented a small flat in Montparnasse, studied art, and moved in the society of sculptors, painters, and writers, among them Gerald Kelly, his oldest friend, and Arnold Bennett. In collaboration with Laurence Housman, he revived a mid-19th century annual, *The Venture*, of which two issues were published, in 1903 and 1904. Among the contributors were Masfield, Chesterton, Hardy, A. E. Houseman, Edmund Gosse, Arthur Symons and James Joyce.

In 1907 his luck finally turned: *Lady Frederick* established his reputation as a man of letters. The next year four of his plays were given simultaneously in London's Strand. In 1911 Maugham, now a popular dramatist, bought a fashionable villa in Mayfair.

At the outbreak of the first World War he became a member of a Red Cross Ambulance Unit in France and worked for some time as a dresser, then as an ambulance driver. But soon his particular qualifications were needed by the Intelligence Department, and for the next two years he served his government as a secret agent, at first in Geneva, Switzerland, and later on in Russia on a special mission to Petrograd to prevent the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution.

In 1915 Maugham's major work, *Of Human Bondage*, was published. "The book did for me", Maugham once said, "what I wanted, and when it was issued to the world (a world in the throes of a terrible war and too much concerned with its own sufferings to bother with the adventures of fiction), I found myself free forever from those pains and unhappy recollections. I put into it everything I then knew and having at last finished it, prepared to make a new start". In an interview with Ward Morehouse in 1940, Maugham said of this book: "I wrote that in 1915. I didn't know then it would be my best, but I have come to accept the public's judgment. Nelson Doubleday tells me they're still selling about 30,000 copies a year".

Maugham spent some time in the United States during the

war, and before returning to England he made the first of numerous journeys to the South Seas, staying for some time on Tahiti. Toward the end of the war he was in poor health, suffering again from tuberculosis, and since it was virtually impossible for him to go to Switzerland to recover, he chose a sanatorium in Nordroch-on-Dee in Scotland. For the next two years he stayed there as an invalid enjoying his leisure by writing and reading.

After the war Maugham made many journeys to the Far East, visiting China, the Federated Malay States, Indo-China, the Shan States, Borneo, and Java. These travels gave him the material for a great many stories. Among the results are his books *On a Chinese Screen*, *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, *The Narrow Corner*, and his play *East of Suez*.

In 1915 Maugham married Gwendolen Syrie Barnardo. In May, 1929, his wife, who is now an interior decorator in Canada, obtained a divorce. They have one daughter, Elizabeth, who was first married to Vincent Paravicini, and after divorcing him married Lord John Hope, whose father the Marquis of Linlithgow, was once Viceroy of India.

In 1928, Maugham, grown tired of travelling, bought his famous Villa Mauresque from a Catholic bishop who had spent most of his time in Algeria. From this home, situated at St. Jean on Cap Ferrat, the writer can drive to Nice or Monte Carlo in a quarter of an hour. On the door of Villa Mauresque is a small symbol which Maugham also uses on his books and letter paper. It originated in the Atlas Mountains, and his father first discovered it in Morocco. In Africa this sign is thought to ward off the evil eye and is understood to be a stylization of the human hand.

At the outbreak of World War II, Maugham again served in the British Intelligence Department in France. In the summer of 1940 he escaped the approaching German armies, leaving behind his home and all his belongings. He came to the United States in the autumn under an arrangement with the British Government, and remained until the summer of

1946. He spent his life mostly in Parker's Ferry, South Carolina, a small cottage on the plantation of Nelson Doubleday, residing each spring and autumn for some time in the Ritz Carlton in New York. In the summers his favourite residence was the Colonial Inn in Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard, where he wrote parts of *The Razor's Edge*.

In 1946 he returned to his home in Southern France, but in spite of his age Maugham did not give up travelling. He celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday on the Pacific coast with his friend Bertram Alanson of San Francisco, thus fulfilling a promise he had made twenty-five years before, returned to New York again in 1951, has visited Spain, Morocco, Portugal, Italy, the Netherlands, and often stays in England. He is still restless. His hobbies, besides travelling, are swimming, tennis and walking, collecting paintings, playing bridge, and, above all, reading. He is reading again all the great novels of the world. At seventy-five he looked upon his life work as completed, and officially retired as a professional writer who henceforth would write no more fiction or plays. A man who has written almost every day for over sixty years — Maugham began at eighteen — is not likely to give it up altogether; however, he has confined himself to writing essays, which he greatly enjoys: the results of his reading and research during the last few years are his essay on Kipling and the collection, *The Vagrant Mood*.

Although on his travels to the Far East he twice nearly died of malaria and once was very nearly drowned, he modestly describes his life as quiet and uneventful.

Somerset Maugham likes to quote a passage from one of his favourite authors, Fray Luis de Leon: "The beauty of life is nothing but this, that each should act in conformity with his nature and his business".





## MAUGHAM — AS I KNOW HIM

**PFEIFFER**, Karl G. Asst. Prof., Department of English, New York University. Born in Washington, D.C., 1904. Author of numerous publications, both scholarly and popular. Contributor to *Esquire*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Parents Magazine*, *Redbook*, *Reader's Digest*.

**T**he Palermo Limited was three hours late. Though I can usually bear up philosophically under such minor trials, I was a little nervous, for when I got off, Somerset Maugham would be there to meet me.

Two days before, finding myself not too far from Yemassee, South Carolina, I had wired Maugham asking whether I could come to visit for two days.

"Three if you like", he had wired back.

I did not like to keep him waiting. I had known Maugham for more than twenty years and I have never seen him in a temper, but so many people say he is irritable that I always expect him to be.

The train came to a stop and I got off. The South Carolina air seemed incredibly warm and soft after the chill of New York. I caught sight of Maugham walking along the platform looking over the people who were getting off. He saw me.

"Oh, hello there. The car's over here".

Maugham is always very casual in his greetings, even if you have crossed the ocean to see him. He has the British reserve, as well as something of the British fear that American exuberance may at any moment get out of bounds. Gratitude particularly embarrasses him, and you learn to deprive yourself of the pleasure of expressing it.

We walked over to the car. I didn't expect to see the Rolls-Royce he had had in France, but I was a bit surprised to see that the car was a light truck, the sort which might be used to haul farm produce.

Maugham explained: "The truck had to come in today

and we couldn't afford to use the extra gas. So I drove it myself".

And he drove it back, over twelve miles of country road. It was all very sensible, but somehow hilariously funny to see the dean of English letters riding high in a farm truck over a dirt road in South Carolina.

Maugham's winter home is called Parkers Ferry. It is an eight-room English cottage on the plantation of Nelson Doubleday, his publisher. There is a river at his front door, and the big plantation house is about a mile away.

Parkers has three bedrooms, each with its bath, a small sitting-room which I have never seen anyone in, a large living-room with three doors leading to a terrace, a bright dining-room, a kitchen and a large entrance hall. On the walls of the living-room and dining-room there are reproductions of the paintings of Gauguin and Picasso. There is one original painting, Gerald Kelly's portrait of the author as a young man. At the Villa Mauresque, Maugham's fabulous home on the French Riviera, there was quite a famous collection of paintings, including a Gauguin; but like almost all of his possessions, these had to be left behind when Maugham fled before the Germans.

We arrived at Parkers Ferry in time for a late lunch, but before we ate Maugham mixed a drink. The master stirs a potent Martini. He claims never to drink more than one, and that is true, but it might be added that Maugham's drinks are generous. When I drink only one I do not feel that I have been unduly moderate.

Then we had lunch. Compared with life at the Villa Mauresque, that at Parkers is simple, but even so I doubt that you could say Maugham is roughing it. He has an excellent cook, Nora, who has added to a mastery of Southern cooking a considerable knowledge of French and English dishes. The only thing at which she draws the line is learning to cook 'Yankee' food. Maugham is fond of baked beans, but Nora somehow can't master the cooking of them.

Nora is going to be a valuable acquisition for someone if Maugham ever leaves Parkers, but she couldn't be lured away now, for she likes her job and her boss. The boss has never cooked, but he knows food, and it is he who teaches Nora.

Lunch began with a *pâté de foie gras* and hard-boiled eggs. There were muffins with the *pâté*, but no butter. The guests the night before had eaten it all. You are an especially welcome guest at Parkers if you bring a pound of butter with you when you come.

There was also a cool white wine. Maugham's opinion of American wines should warm the hearts of our native growers, for he thinks our best wines are quite as good as French ones. For lunch he usually serves a *sauterne*.

The menus at Parkers are still pretty elaborate, but of course they wrestle with the ration-point problem. Maugham says it is sometimes quite a game to produce a good meal. He has problems most of us don't have, for everything must be bought at Beaufort, twenty miles away.

After the *pâté* there was red rice -- a local dish of rice, tomatoes, green peppers and bits of bacon. Then there was a green salad and cheese. Coffee was served later in the living-room.

After lunch we sat around and talked. People sometimes ask me what Maugham talks about. I think they have a notion famous people talk famously most of the time. At the very least, they expect Maugham to toss off a few derogatory epigrams about human nature every few minutes. He doesn't. Famous people, like the rest of us, talk nonsense much of the time. Perhaps they talk nonsense with more distinction, but they do not always discuss matters of weight, and everything they say is not memorable. Maugham is likely to talk about almost anything, except his own work. That he rarely mentions, unless he is asked a direct question. Nothing embarrasses him more than praise. Perhaps he does not dislike it, but he dislikes hearing it or reading it.

On this particular occasion there was one other guest at

Parkers — Maugham's nephew, Captain the Honorable Robin Maugham. Robin is Honorable because his father is Lord Maugham, but he is a captain in his own right. He is now invalided out of the English Army, for he was twice wounded, and is in this country to see whether he can launch an American edition of *Convoy*, a new English magazine of which he is the editor.

After a while Maugham went to his room for his nap. His life at Parkers follows a definite pattern. He wakes up about seven and reads before he gets up. He has long had a habit of reading something substantial each day, and this is when he does it. By 'substantial' I mean the sort of thing the rest of us plan to read some day and usually put off. On my last visit, Maugham was reading T. S. Eliot, whom he considers the most important poet now writing.

Maugham has his breakfast in bed at eight — stewed fruit, coffee, toast, sometimes an egg. Mary, who is what in a Maugham play is called a 'parlour-maid', brings it to him without his ringing for it, for he is always awake and ready. In addition to Mary and Nora, the staff at Parkers includes Sunday, the gardener. He has a nephew whose name Maugham likes to tell guests. It is Religious.

In whatever part of the world I have visited Maugham, I have noticed that his servants, whatever their nationality or colour, are extremely fond of him. I think this is because, in addition to paying them well, he treats them with unusual courtesy. In 1942 I stayed in Beverly Hills with him in a house which he had taken furnished, servants and all. One night I had borrowed his car to go to a party and returned somewhat late — five in the morning, to be exact. As I was putting the car away I saw the butler arriving.

"What in the world are you doing, getting here at this hour?" I asked him.

"Oh", he said, "I just like to get here early and have everything nice for Mr. Maugham". Mr. Maugham had no idea his butler was in a habit of arriving at such an hour.

After breakfast Maugham dresses and goes to his writing-room. He never joins his house guests until lunchtime. You are supposed to amuse yourself until then. The Villa Mauresque was so palatial that Maugham could easily absent himself in fact as well as in theory, but Parkers is small. It is so small that in order to give their host his privacy all the guests have to enter into the game. Should you run into Maugham in the hall in the morning, you ignore him or at best nod curtly. If he thinks you do not know he is to be left alone, he is not above escaping you through the kitchen. If you should wander into his writing-room -- a one-room house adjoining the larger one -- he would not bite your head off, but would suggest that you run and play. A few hours later he will greet you genially in the living-room with a surprising 'where-have-you-been-all-morning?' air.

Maugham's New York home, where he lives several months each spring and fall, is a suite at the Ritz-Carlton, which he calls a quiet family hotel. He spends his summers at Martha's Vineyard.\*

Usually Maugham goes to his writing-room about eight-thirty, sometimes later. He works until twelve-thirty. He never works more than four hours a day, and seldom less. At present he is writing the first draft of his new novel, which is laid in the Italian Renaissance and is chiefly conversations between Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia. At twelve-thirty Maugham joins his guests for cocktails, which he always mixes. There are never more than two guests nowadays, for Parkers has room for no more, but at the Villa Mauresque there were often half a dozen and more in for lunch and dinner.

After lunch Maugham sits around with his guests for a while and then goes to his room for his nap. He naps only half an hour, but often remains another half to read a detective story. Then he shows up again. At this time of day he

\*In 1942, 1943, and 1944, Mr. Maugham stayed in the Colonial Inn, Edgartown, Mass., where he wrote parts of *The Razor's Edge* and worked at his anthology *Introduction to Modern English and American Literature*.

likes to get some exercise. He is fond of walking and riding. He played a lot of golf when he lived where he could get a golf course easily. In France we used sometimes to get in the Rolls-Royce with the clubs, drive to Villefranche, board the yacht, and sail to the golf course.

If the weather is bad Maugham likes a game of cards. He is an excellent bridge player, dependable rather than spectacular. I once heard him describe his game in words which he has put into the mouth of one of his characters in *The Painted Veil*:

"I have no illusions about my game. I am a good player of the second class".

During the afternoon the mail arrives. There are usually a lot of letters, and some of them are always fan letters --- more than he can easily handle, for he has no secretary now.\*

I first met Somerset Maugham in January, 1924, at the old Shoreham Hotel in Washington. He had come to Washington for the opening of his play *The Camel's Back* --- one of his few flops. I had come to Washington to meet Maugham. I had recently read *Of Human Bondage* and was full of questions about it. Actually I hoped to show how deep and subtle was my understanding of the novel. Maugham was very polite, if a little bored.

At that time Maugham was quite a celebrity, but not such a one as he has become since. *Of Human Bondage*, nine years published, was not so widely acclaimed as it is now. In those days Maugham was better known as a dramatist than as a novelist. Many of the books upon which his reputation now rests had not yet appeared. *Cakes and Ale* and *The Gentleman in the Parlour* were not published until six years later, and fourteen years were to pass before *The Summing Up* appeared. But at that, Maugham was not exactly a newcomer to fame, for his first book had been published twenty-seven

\*Maugham's devoted friend and secretary, Frederick Gerald Haxton, to whom he dedicated *A Writer's Notebook*, died on November 7, 1944.

years before, and he had been a successful dramatist for sixteen years.

After my first meeting with Maugham I did not see him again for a long time. During the years we did not meet, we corresponded; that is, I wrote him half a dozen times a year in care of his bankers in Paris and he answered once or twice, usually from points somewhere east of Suez.

In the spring of 1938 Maugham was in Washington. I was living in North Carolina at the time, and he telephoned me. He spoke as casually as if we had recently separated.

"Look here — can you come up and dine with me?"

"Why, I'd be delighted", I answered. "When?"

"I know you're very busy". (I certainly wasn't too busy for that.) "When would be convenient?"

"What about tomorrow?" (It was too late to get there that night.)

"Good, tomorrow at seven, then".

"Shall I wear a dinner jacket?"

"Good God, no!" said the creator of the jungle-dressing *Mr. Warburton*.

When I saw Maugham the next night, I thought he looked older and more tired than I remembered him. This was not surprising, for it was many years since I had seen him. His face had some of the lines which they say show how cynical and disillusioned he is. One reason people comment on the lines is that Maugham insists that the photographers leave them in. He says he can understand a person around forty wanting to look younger than he is, but when you are really old why not look as old as possible? Maugham's pictures look very much like him. Once when I was with him in the lobby of a New York theatre, I heard some people near us say, "There's Somerset Maugham". I told him he had been recognized, and he said, "That shows the pictures aren't too bad".

Maugham was staying at the Mayflower Hotel. While we were having dinner he invited me to visit him at the Villa

Mauresque during the coming summer, and I accepted with alacrity. We did not know what was ahead, but I doubt that even the certainty of war would have prevented my going. Still, I had no idea then that I would be one of the last guests at the Mauresque before the debacle.

Our conversation was about this and that. Somehow we got into a discussion of Henry James' style. Just then a photographer came up to the table.

"Good evening, Mr. Maugham. Do you mind if I take your picture?"

"Not at all".

"Just go right on talking".

That was easy for Maugham, for he was used to this sort of thing, but I was embarrassed and ill at ease. Observing my predicament, Maugham said, "This is the time I always recite the Lord's Prayer".

The photographer snapped the picture and we went back to cutting up Henry James. When the photograph was published, we looked perfectly natural and highly animated.

The next time I saw Maugham was in the summer of 1939. I had managed to accept his invitation to spend August at the Villa Mauresque. I was due to arrive on the first of August, but just to be on the safe side I came down to the Riviera about the middle of July. On the first I got into the local at Cannes for the short trip along the Côte d'Azur to Beaulieu, the station nearest the Mauresque.

You come up to the villa through an expensively-created jungle. When you reach the house you know it is Maugham's, for over the high Moorish doorway there is the Arabian sign against the evil eye which is to be found on the covers of all Maugham's books. Maugham uses it as a kind of monogram.

There was a constant succession of people through the villa. Often there would be a dozen or more to lunch or dinner. If you were invited to lunch you weren't supposed to hang around all afternoon, unless the invitation included bridge. You stayed for about an hour after you were fed — and



extremely well fed — and then you left. After that, the house guests might take a dip in the pool carved out of rock on the hillside above the house. Some days we spent on Maugham's yacht, the *Sara*. Afternoons were long, for although lunch was late, before-dinner cocktails were not until eight. You could lie around most of the time in shorts.

There was a kind of studied informality about dress. During the day you could wear pretty much anything. In the evening the ladies got themselves up elaborately, and the men wore dinner clothes, most of them the summer variety, with mess jackets. But if the night was warm, we took our coats off. The ladies took off nothing, no matter how warm the night, for they wore very little in the first place.

We dined out of doors, on a terrace overlooking the Mediterranean. . . It seemed like nothing so much as a scene in a Maugham play. Below us was the sea, around us were orange and avocado trees. On one side the house loomed large and white, and down its three marble steps leading from the drawing-room, liveried footmen brought food and drink. At night there was always champagne. There were many courses. Maugham likes food and knows food; few houses have served better.

There was a good deal of bridge. Once the Windsors were there and an amusing incident occurred. The Duchess, who as everyone knows, has a keen wit, was Maugham's partner. He had the bid and she was putting her hand down.

"I'm afraid I don't have very much for you".

"I don't know", replied Maugham. "You have two kings".

"What good are kings?" said the Duchess. "They always abdicate".

Two ladies who overheard hastily excused themselves and rushed to the phone, in the hope of being the first to spread the *bon mot* along the Côte d'Azur.

Maugham writes everything in longhand. He does not dictate. The idea for a story is usually in his mind for some years before he writes it, and writing is only the last step in

a long process of composition. When he gets to the writing, he has his story so carefully thought out that he spends a relatively short time on it. He writes straight through and then goes back and revises, neatly crossing out a word, sentence or whole paragraph and inserting the new material over the deleted. When a paragraph is added he puts a symbol at the place where the new material is to go, and on the opposite page writes the paragraph, placing before it the same symbol. When he has finished with a manuscript it is neat and clean and, once you have mastered Maugham's somewhat odd handwriting, easy to read. Then a typescript is made from the manuscript.

So many words have been written about Maugham's phenomenal success, financial and otherwise, that it is generally overlooked that he struggled against every discouragement for ten years before he made a decent living from writing. His mother died when he was eight, his father two years later. Abruptly he was taken out of the cosmopolitan atmosphere in which he had lived until this time, and thrust into the narrow, provincial life of a small English village. He was sent to live with an uncle, the Reverend Henry MacDonald Maugham, at Whitstable.

Maugham began writing early. He says he took to writing like a duck to water. He finds this a little surprising; his family had been lawyers for generations. Maugham was only twenty-three when his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, was published, and it had been written two years before. Before it appeared, its author had written a second novel, *The Making of a Saint*. In my copy of this work Maugham has written: "A novel written when the author was one and twenty, and he writes his name in it now with reluctance".

Despite this early success, things did not go well. Maugham now thinks it would have been better for him if he had not succeeded in publishing so early. Had he not, he might not have prematurely abandoned the practice of medicine. The study and practice of medicine Maugham thinks invaluable

experience for the young writer. Moreover, had he not been successful so early, he would not have suffered so much from the setback which followed.

His setback came when, having published a novel which had considerable critical if little financial success (he made only \$100 from it), he brought out two more novels (*The Making of a Saint* and *The Hero*) and a book of short stories (*Orientalisms*), none of which was a success. In 1902 he again achieved critical success with *Mrs. Craddock*, but still made very little money. His income for the first ten years of his writing career averaged £100 a year.

It was not until *Lady Frederick* was produced in 1908, when he was thirty-four years old, that Maugham began to make money. He has kept it up ever since. As soon as *Lady Frederick* proved successful, managers snapped up the plays which had been going the rounds in vain. Soon Maugham had four running at one time in London and was the most-talked-of dramatist of the day.

Maugham is not a man to belittle other people's contributions to his success. He has paid handsome tribute to the talents of those actors and actresses who, he says, have done so much to insure the success of his plays. He pays especial tribute to Ethel Barrymore and Billie Burke, and also to Fay Compton, Marie Tempest, Irene Vanbrugh, and Gladys Cooper.

Maugham frankly admits that he first wrote to make money. He wanted money because money would give him freedom.

Those who carp at his tremendous financial success, seeing in it evidence that he has sold his soul to Mammon, overlook the fact that since 1908 he has written what he wanted to write. If his work has pleased others, so much to the good; he has certainly not been unhappy over that. But it was first of all to please himself that he wrote. There are few works which make fewer concessions to the reader than *The Moon and Sixpence*, *Cakes and Ale*, and *For Services Rendered*.

When he wrote *Of Human Bondage* Maugham expected nothing of it. He wrote it to relieve his mind of certain obsessions. That was his primary aim. None of his novels before it had sold more than five or six thousand copies. He expected no more of this one. No one was more surprised than he over its success. Though he has never said so, I suspect he thinks it is somewhat overrated. He could hardly be expected to concur in the opinion of some that nothing he has written since is equal to it.

Since so much publicity has recently been given to the subject of Maugham's earnings and income, it might be well to point out one fact which escaped the researchers. Maugham's income is not affected one iota by the success or failure of anything he writes. He is in the United States by an arrangement with the British Government under which he gets a stipulated sum each month -- an amount which is a small fraction of his real income.

There has been so much speculation about Maugham's enigmatic personality that it seems hopeless to try to make him appear convincing. After attempting to reconcile the contradictions they find in him, the subtlest critics have thrown up the sponge. They call him unexplainable and let it go at that. One result of this is that if you don't find him unexplainable, you lay yourself open to the charge of failing to perceive his complexity. In the last analysis Maugham, like the rest of us, is inexplicable; but there are in his character certain well-defined and observable traits which do not defy recognition.

Maugham himself is rather amused by the notion that he is a complicated, mysterious person, for he looks upon himself as perfectly natural, or at any rate as natural as it is possible for a human being to be. I think it appeals to his sense of irony that anyone who is as unaffected as he is should be looked upon as artificial and mysterious.

I must confess that I, too, think Maugham is a difficult person to know well and that, after twenty years of knowing

him, I do not know him well. But this is not because he is mysterious or wants to appear as such. I think it is due chiefly to the fact that he is uninterested in talking about himself. He rarely tells you what he thinks or feels unless you ask him directly, but if you do he will tell you with the greatest courtesy and frankness. But, unlike most people, he has never felt any urge to unburden his heart, and as he is entirely without the desire to convert anyone to his way of thinking, he does not air his views at length.

Among people who know Maugham, there are two widely divergent views of him. Some see him as cynical, disillusioned, and worldly; others as kind, thoughtful, tolerant, at times sentimental. Among those who know him only by his writing the former summary is more popular. An interesting fact about those who disapprove of his view of life is that they seldom express their disapproval by ceasing to read him.

I wonder whether these contradictions are not partly explained by differences among the observers. Maugham does not consider himself cynical. He considers himself realistic.

But the diversity of opinion about Maugham may have a better explanation than the one I have given. It is that some of the unamiable traits were once there. Maugham insists that he has an irritable disposition. If so, it is today pretty thoroughly disciplined. Maugham had adopted and long practised a philosophy which enjoys calmness, tolerance and serenity. I do not think that any of these were natural to him, and yet I know of no one who exhibits these qualities as well as he. The mellowness now ascribed to him may be the victory of philosophy over a natural tendency toward irascibility and querulousness.

Though I describe him as calm and serene, over the years I have occasionally seen evidences of irritability. Once, when I had got up to get him the monocle he had said he wanted, he said testily, "Damn it, let me wait on myself". But a few minutes later he sought to make amends by saying mildly, "You don't really have to go tomorrow, do you?"

"Civilized" and "cosmopolitan" are terms which at the moment it is fashionable to apply to Maugham. He is, as everyone knows, an Englishman who was born in Paris, went to school in England and Germany, has travelled the world over, had a home on the Riviera, and now lives in America. I have often been curious to know what he thinks of this country, and have sometimes asked him point-blank. He has now lived here for four years, a longer period of time than he ever spent here before.\*

"The chief thing that has struck me this time", he told me, "is the wonderful desire of Americans to learn. The publishers have the future of America in their hands far more than they realize, for it is within their power to put every sort of book on the market at a very low price. Because of their love of learning, Americans should be provided with the best possible books at prices all can afford.

"Another thing which has struck me is that if you give Americans the best, they will eat it up; but they won't touch second-rate masquerading as first. I will give you a couple of examples of what I mean.

"When I was in San Francisco I went to an exhibition of modern French paintings. These would have meant nothing on Park Avenue, but the Lockheed workers and their girls came and saw and argued. It was obvious that the pictures meant something to them.

"Also", Maugham continued, "when WPA gave cheap concerts and the conductors padded their programmes with second-rate works which they thought would appeal to the new audiences, the audiences received these coldly, but were enthusiastic over Bach and Mozart".

Maugham is a remarkably modest person. He attributes his success as much to luck as to merit. He has no exaggerated notion of his place in literature. He thinks that in a long history of literature he may get a half page. That, he says, is  
 \*In the summer of 1946 Maugham returned to his home in the South of France, after a stay of almost six years in the United States.

not survival that amounts to anything. The only survival worth the name is that people continue to read your work and get pleasure from it, as they do from *Robinson Crusoe*. Maugham thinks he has no chance at all of that. A few of his things may survive briefly, he thinks — perhaps a few plays, because they are in the tradition started by Congreve; a few short stories, because they give a picture of an isolated East soon to disappear.

I asked Maugham which particular works he thought had the best chance of surviving.

"I would not venture to say", Maugham answered. "An author is not a good judge of his own work. Posterity will make the choices and the decisions".

*Cakes and Ale* is probably Maugham's favourite among his novels. But *The Moon and Sixpence* has, he thinks, the best chance of a limited survival. "But", he added, "I have never given the matter any thought".

In company Maugham never grabs the centre of the stage, nor does he sit in obvious and sphinx-like silence. He never talks like a character in one of his drawing-room comedies. His observations are penetrating, but they are not studied nor consciously witty. Yet he has a ready appreciation of other people's wit. He will repeat to others a witty thing you have said. He never hears you out with obvious patience so that he can top your remark with a better one. He has none of the malicious cruelty which the sophisticated often reserve for the unsophisticated. Nor has he any of the engaging come-hitherness which leads people to get pally in bars. I doubt that he has ever in his life slapped a back or raised his voice in song.

Because he does not expect too much of human nature, he is more readily pleased than most when people show unexpected virtue. He is often so pleased. He calls it loving-kindness, love divested of most of the sexual instinct, and he considers it the only virtue having valid claim to be an end in itself. He sees goodness in people whom the rest of man-

## SOMERSET MAUGHAM

kind consider unworthy specimens, like *Sophie* in *The Razor's Edge*.

Goodness, or loving-kindness, is both instinctive and learned, Maugham thinks. His *Salvatore* is the story of a man in whom it was instinctive. Goodness is best revealed in self-control, in tolerance, in thoughtfulness and small acts of courtesy.

"If I were to say in a few words what I have learned from life", concluded Maugham, "it is to regret nothing. Many of the things which happen to us serve a purpose we cannot see at the time. Many misfortunes have their compensations.

"Our business is right living. The problem of right living is complicated by the fact that there is no one code for everybody. One's job is to find what is right for oneself and to follow it.

"The beauty of life", Maugham says, quoting Fray Luis de Leon, "is nothing but this: that each should act in conformity with his nature and his business".

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## MR. MAUGHAM ON THE ESSENTIALS OF WRITING

**VAN GELDER**, Robert, Editor and author. Born in Baltimore, Md., 1904. Reporter for *The New York Times* since 1928. Editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, 1943-1946. Member of P.E.N. Club. Editor-in-Chief of Crown Publishers, New York, until his death in 1952. Author: *Front Page Story*, 1937; *The Enemy in the House*, 1940; *Writing and Writers*, 1945; *Important People*, 1948.

**W** Somerset Maugham is in this country as a British agent. He glanced about the grill room of the Ritz Carlton Hotel — the grill room is below street level — and with an air of semi-professionalism commented that it would make a middling good air raid shelter. He ordered corned beef hash and a poached egg. "Not long ago I was extremely hungry, and had been hungry for days and had the chance to eat bully beef with a sauce over it. Delicious. I hope to recapture the flavour with corned beef hash".

The hunger and the bully beef were part of 67-year-old Mr. Maugham's second World War adventure. When the blitzkrieg started last spring he was at his home on the Riviera. "We were evacuated in two British colliers, about 1,300 of us. There were 500 aboard the collier on which I was a passenger, 538 including the crew. And when I tell you that the lavatories had been planned only for thirty-eight crew members, you will understand that conditions were not ideal. We had been told to bring three days' provisions and one small suitcase each. More than a week elapsed before we touched at our first port, Gibraltar, and as many of us had brought most of our provisions in bottles, on the theory that food was less important than good cheer, we were hungry. That bully beef was a God-send".

He left England at the beginning of October and has spent the time since then in and about New York, lecturing, giving

interviews, writing articles. He will go to Chicago in December and will spend January on the Pacific Coast. "After that I don't know. But I hope that when I return to England the clipper will make a direct flight".

Like H. G. Wells he believes that entry into the war by the United States is against England's advantage. England is safe from invasion, he said, as long as the R.A.F. can stay in the sky and the R.A.F. cannot be knocked out. "The Germans are losing three planes to our one and even that figure does not indicate our advantage in pilots. Often our pilots can bail out of a doomed plane, return to the airport and take up another machine. Every German pilot shot down is out of the war".

Mr. Maugham says that he has sworn off fiction for the war's duration. He spends his mornings writing letters and articles.

The articles, he says, come hard, he is not accustomed to marshalling arguments with facts to hinder the flow and he prefers to write about the people of his imagination. A story comes to him "in a straight clear line", an article may be written only by taking conscious thought. He enjoys writing fiction. "I am convinced that the subconscious does the really difficult work. I sit down with fountain pen and paper and the story pours out. However lousy a section is I let it go. I write on to the end. Then the subconscious mind has done what it can, what is to be created is there. And the rest — the rest is simply effort. You may go over and over, polishing, rewriting the lousy parts, sometimes rewriting a page for the whole day, going over a chapter time and time again, until, though you know it isn't right, it is the best you can do. But that is the labour of the conscious mind, the effort of the craftsman. It is the first draft, the creative draft, that is basic".

He said that as soon as the war is over he would hurry to England. "I have an idea for a book, a book and a half, that I am most anxious to write".

Why has he, after *Of Human Bondage*, so rarely returned to the English scene for his characters and background?

"In England, you know, civilization goes fairly deep, and it is an old civilization. This makes for an apparent sameness in the people — one must go through many layers to discover what it is that sets each man apart, to discover the unique and the natural man. Every man is unique, of course, but the strangeness that makes a man a story, the oddity within him, is not easy to find in a man who wears his civilization thickly. During the first World War I travelled, and after it my travels became extensive. In those parts of the world where civilization is worn thinner I found that the unique man is far easier to recognize. Material leaped at me — I handled it as well as I could".

On writing in general he said that it is the personality of the author, the free range of his mind, that determines the value of his work.

"The four greatest novelists who ever lived — Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Dickens and Balzac — none of them could write, that is, none were good craftsmen. But they saw deeply into people, and they saw people the right way, they were the right men in their handling of people. That is why they are great".

"Mr. Maugham, do you believe that Dickens liked people?"

"The books indicate that he did — the biographies make it appear doubtful.

"I think it is unimportant whether he liked people or not. What is important is to understand them. For myself, I like very few people. But I believe that I understand them because, though I cannot say that I like them, I can be interested. I am interested in almost every one I meet. If your interest is sufficient, likes and dislikes are rather beside the point. It is not the business of a novelist to judge. He observes".

"Do you, Mr. Maugham — do you have any moral standards?"

"Just now I have. In fact I am quite hot on moral standards just now. Because I believe that France fell not because of rotten politicians, not for any of the causes usually given, but because the people of France were morally confused. They had no moral standards. I hate to talk this way, I hate to preach, but I truly and honestly and warmly believe that we can defeat Hitler only if we keep our standards very high, if we are not soft with ourselves".

"But did you, through most of your life, have moral standards?"

"Oh, no", said Mr. Maugham. "Not at all. I've met so many people, often the scum of the earth, and found them, you know, quite decent. I am an uncomfortable stranger to moral indignation. I feel it now because I believe that it is the great necessity of the present. We must set up standards now and live up to them. In England, I don't know whether you have heard, every one in the country is working — all out — for the country. Labour has given up gains that were the result of years of struggle. They have given up these gains overnight and under no more pressure than the advice of their leaders that the sacrifices were necessary for the country's good. Everyone is making sacrifices, that must be. We have set standards for ourselves to save ourselves, to win, and we shall live up to them".

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## HOW TO WRITE — BY MAUGHAM

GILROY, Harry. Critic, Assistant to Sunday Editor of the *New York Times* since 1948. Born in 1907. Newspaper writer with Newark (N.J.) *News*, 1930-1941. Secretary to Governor of New Jersey, 1941-1942.

Those millions of Americans who are heavy with a book or wistful about one they always meant to begin, are advised to put a red circle around Tuesday's date. W. Somerset Maugham, becoming 75 on that day, will throw open for competition one of the top author's billets in the world by retiring from the writing profession. Henceforth, he will be an amateur writer, he swears, and confine himself to essays "which certainly will not be in competition with anyone, since no one cares to read essays".

Mr. Maugham uttered this vow, with unblinking resolution, while looking directly into the cold morning sunlight from his room on the south side of the Plaza Hotel. A bottle of whisky and one of vermouth stood on a table in the room, but Mr. Maugham neither drank from his supply nor offered the interviewer any. The author's statement, under these austere circumstances, had to be taken with complete sincerity. Accordingly, he was asked to supply for his aspiring successors the secret of how to become the most skilful writer in the world, a title frequently applied to Mr. Maugham himself.

Slipping over the arm of a chair into a sidesaddle position while organizing his thoughts, Mr. Maugham gave an impression of being associated with almost any profession but that of writer. One could see him as the doctor he set out to be fifty-seven years ago or — just as well — as the Lord Chancellor of England that his brother, Viscount Maugham, became. His hair, brown streaked with grey, was smoothed down too carefully for an artist; it went with his dark, stockbroker tweeds, blue shirt, black tie, and gold-rimmed glasses

on a black string. Only when the feet came to attention by being cocked over the chair arm, and a pair of black, mocassin-type shoes were revealed, did one realize that this was a worker in the home — a baby-sitter or writer.

"All those millions of people are quite right to want to be authors", Mr. Maugham said. "The job is entertaining and the rewards can be great. They are wrong, of course, about writing being romantic, and they should never forget that it is damned hard work. It is creation, and creation is hard. In India I knew a man who went in for meditation. He told me that after three hours of meditation he was so exhausted he had to lie down. And writing, you see, is not only meditation but also the physical transference of the meditation into words on paper".

These observations were delivered rather remotely, while Mr. Maugham gazed out of the window, but at the finish he began to size up the interviewer the way a detective would mentally card-index a pickpocket in the morning line-up. Before any feathers could be ruffled by the glance, Mr. Maugham smiled. "Now let's have the questions of the aspiring writer one at a time, and I shall talk to him as if he were 20".

What does a writer need to start with?

"First, you need experience". Kissing a girl, losing some money at poker? "Exactly. While it is quite unnecessary to eat a whole sheep in order to know the taste of mutton, you should at least eat a chop.

"To write a novel, you need to know a smattering about a wide range of things. Much of it you learn by reading, of course. Possibly you know that I read a good bit of Guy de Maupassant while under 20. I was born in Paris, went back there quite often after starting school in England, and read Maupassant because his books were displayed on bookstalls where I could read them free on the pretext of being a shopper. Fortunately, I could not have found a better guide to lucid writing.

"One other attribute a writer really must have at the start — a little talent. One of the most tragic things about the writing profession is to meet people who are trying to follow it without the basic gift. Greenwich Village here is full of such people, many of them admirable people who could make a success of other things. Some of them have even put out one book that created a stir, but that was really all they had to say, and years go by without another thing of theirs being published".

How should a writer do his work?

"Not by waiting for inspiration, that is certain. If you wait until you feel in the mood you will write very little. You can get in the habit of writing every day, you know. A lot of people have trouble starting their day's writing, and I am like that myself. I have two methods for getting around that difficulty. While in the bath I think of the first one or two sentences I want to write. Sometimes I can't, and I get to staring at that blank page without the foggiest notion of how to begin. In that case the only thing to do, in my experience, is to start writing any sort of rubbish. I may fill half a page that way with things that have to be crossed out, but the subconscious finally becomes activated and the real writing begins".

"Subconscious? Yes. I have had the experience, as many other writers have, of reading over what I have written and wondering, 'How the dickens did I ever write that?' I claim that the best of writing is done by the subconscious. To encourage that sort of thing, I keep right on with a story. I'm not one for going after the third chapter a half dozen times before being ready for Chapter Four. So long as the original writing is under way, I try to keep the subconscious flowing. When the story is done I go back, my intelligence takes over, and I write and re-write".

What sort of working conditions are best?

"I have a room at the top of my house. I like quiet, and no one is supposed to come up the steps to my room. It is a

large room looking out on the Mediterranean and the mountains". Wasn't the view distracting? "Yes, it was. One day I said to myself that I didn't want to be staring at such a view when I was trying to write so I had the window blocked up. You see what conditions I favour for a writer — oh, and I forgot the radiator. In that room I have a great big radiator at my back. When I go up to write in the morning I feel bright and warm, but as I write my hands and feet grow colder and colder. The blood — if I may venture a medical opinion — all goes to my head.

"The conditions I have described certainly are not essential to all writers. Compton Mackenzie always believed that he could write best while listening to his wife playing the piano. She, poor girl, used to play until her fingers dropped off. I don't know whether that still goes on or not".

How much writing should be done each day?

"Three hours of writing a day is enough. Darwin, I read somewhere, never worked more than three hours a day. If he could revolutionize the whole theory of evolution by working that length of time, three hours certainly should be long enough for me to write. I repeat what I said about creation being a hard process. It takes too much out of you to write longer. Anyhow, a writer works all the time when he is away from his desk, absorbing impressions and making notes for writing he will do later.

"Also, a young writer should consider the possibility that he may not have a real gift, and he should work at some job that supports him while writing. Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, not to mention evenings. I wrote my first novel while working from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.; I had supper at 6.30 and wrote until I went to bed. When you have another job you surely should not attempt to work more than three hours a day at writing".

How does a writer work while away from his desk?

"First, you meet people. I don't exactly classify people, but now and then I say to myself that there may be some-



thing there I will some day make use of. Writers take someone they know as a foundation for a character, work on this foundation with their own experience, and finally set down a character that has only the faintest resemblance to the original person.

"Some writers pretend that they invent their characters out of their heads. Hugh Walpole used to say that, but I don't believe it is true of any writer.

"Incidentally, I would advise a writer to eschew the company of fellow writers and spend his time instead with his raw material. A writer should get around all he can. On my travels I make notes of what things and people look like. This business of making notes and keeping them is important. When a theme for a story occurs to me I make a note and sometimes it is years before I write the story.

"You may know the story, *Lord Mountdrago*. For thirty years I kept taking out the note about that idea and always putting it away because it seemed too difficult to work out. One day I decided to have a shot at it, and several people have been kind enough to put it in anthologies. The same with *The Colonel's Lady*, the story a movie has been made of. I found that note while sorting over papers in preparation for the publishing of my notebooks. The note was forty years old, but the last time I was here in the Plaza I decided to give the theme a try, and it came out all right".

What style would he recommend for a writer?

"To write simply and clearly has been my own purpose, and one has to work very hard at it. I happen to like the plain and simple way. When I was starting out, I made up lists of magnificent, colourful, strange words, but I never could get the hang of using them. Some writers like the florid way of telling a story, but the simple way seems to me more in keeping with the English language.

"After all, there is nothing new to be done in writing. All the stories have been told. All you can do is to tell the stories as they look through the spectacles of your idiosyncrasies.

"How do you tell your story? You have to tell it along some line that will hold the reader's interest. That is all a plot is — that object of scorn with quite a few writers of our time — a line that carries the reader along.

"There are only three possible story lines. One, the line looks like a fever chart, such as a Dickens story written with something at the end of each monthly instalment to induce the purchaser to return for next month's issue. Two, the line goes straight up and stops, like a detective story, when the murderer is brought to book. Three, the line looks like a semi-circle, with the story starting quietly, going up and then ending quietly, of which the perfect example is *Madame Bovary*.

"A writer must always keep in mind that he is trying to get readers to believe his story. When readers don't believe, the story is done. Some great books have been killed for me because of the absence of that quality".

Example, please? "Well, *A Passage to India*. E. M. Forster is wonderfully gifted in creating real people and making you see a scene and a situation. But I cannot bring myself to believe that the young woman, such a sensible, well-balanced woman, would make that charge of rape after that business of the caves saying 'Boom'. In Forster's book, *Aspects of the Novel*, he indicates small regard for plot, but it seems to me that the plot should have been considered in *Passage* and the young woman drawn as the sort of character for whom such a hysterical accusation would seem credible.

"Along with getting the reader to believe, the writer must make the reader eager to go on and turn the page. Those qualities appear in the highest degree attained in English literature in Jane Austen. I turn each page in a frenzy to know what happens. Of course, nothing happens, but I must hurry on to turn the next page. Even while I am lost in the story, I ask myself how she manages this trick. My advice for young writers is that Jane Austen probably was able to convey the feeling of belief because she enormously believed

herself in the reality of her characters and what they were doing”.

Is there any one theme with which a writer should begin?

“A writer should begin with what he knows about. Out of my experience as a medical student in a London slum’s hospital, I wrote *Liza of Lambeth*, which came out when I was 23. For most young writers, the most valuable material they have is in their recollections of childhood. You never see any characters for the rest of your life as clearly as you see the ones you associated with when you were a child”. The result should be other versions of the theme *Of Human Bondage*? “That sort of thing, yes.

“But I would not wish for any writer an early success, as I had with *Liza*. Right after that came out, I went off to Spain and set myself up as a writer. I wrote three or four novels there which were no good. I’m sure that I wasted themes that might have been extremely useful later”.

What should an American writer read of American literature?

“Something of everything. Speaking of the past, I would say there have been three great American novels — *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Scarlet Letter*. Anything of William Dean Howells? I read over *The Rise of Silas Lapham* a short time ago, and I found it very good but as a period piece. The same with that neglected work of Edith Wharton’s, *The Custom of the Country*, charming as a period piece”. Was he considering Henry James? “Oh, I knew the old fellow, you know. It is hard to judge his work because one liked him so much. When I read a page of his, I can hear his voice — his rather deep voice — rolling out those ponderous periods, and that obscures my reaction to what I am reading. But *The Ambassadors* is a fine novel”.

As to style, what would you say to a young writer about symbolism?

“I don’t understand symbolism in fiction. It is only a fashion of the day, so far as I can judge, and it will dis-

appear. What is a symbol? You say one thing and you mean another. Why the hell shouldn't you say it right out?"

What about social significance as an element in novels?

"Propaganda novels are often animated by the desire to bring about social reforms and by love of mankind. While I sympathize with these motives, I think it very unlikely that these motives conduce to writing good novels. Dickens wrote from such motives at times, and look what happened. *Hard Times* is unreadable, but *David Copperfield* continues to be enchanting.

"Every writer is exposed to the tendency, at some time, to write a journalistic novel. He is very much mistaken if he thinks he will produce anything of permanence in that way. The only things that make a story enduring in interest are representation of the characters of people and what concerns them.

"I will admit that I have not been a crusader. I look on myself as a story-teller. Since thirty, when I had to write a novel a year to have enough money to live on, I have written largely for my own entertainment, and I seem to have entertained some other people in the process".

Should a young writer learn touch-typing before beginning, or was the hunt-and-peck system good enough?

"I would not know. Every line I write is in longhand. I have never found a typewriter through which the subconscious seemed able to penetrate, but it seems to flow right through a fountain pen. Besides, as you know, no typewriter can spell, but I find that my pen spells very well indeed".

The telephone rang, and Mr. Maugham crossed the room. With a simple dignity about his carriage and a grace of movement that was surprising for his years, he was the embodiment of Continental urbanity. Here was the French-born Englishman, educated at Heidelberg, who had attended the needy ill in a London slum and had played with dissatisfied rich on the Riviera, the ambulance driver in France and secret British agent in Switzerland and Russia during World

War I, the hearty convalescent from tuberculosis of the lungs, the author of one great and bitter novel and of numerous entertaining ones, the witty playwright and the sardonic teller of countless diverting short stories.

A lilting woman's voice, pouring into the room as he lifted the phone to his ear, brought an enigmatic smile to his face. "Hello, darling", he said. "Oh, I am extremely well after being up to an unearthly hour this morning. Two o'clock it was. Yes, darling, we really did play bridge".

A suitable speech, one felt, for the most perfect of all Maugham characters.

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## THE PHILOSOPHER AS MAN OF LETTERS

EDMAN, Irwin. Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy, Columbia University. Born in New York City, 1896. Contributor to *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *New York Times*, *Herald Tribune*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *Atlantic Monthly*. Author: *Poems*, 1925; *Four Ways of Philosophy*, 1937; *Philosopher's Quest*, 1947. Edited Works of Plato, 1927; *The Philosophy of Santayana*, 1936; *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy*, 1943.

Obviously, what prompts me to speak briefly this evening on the theme of the philosopher as man of letters is the presence of our new Honorary Member. He is in at least two senses a philosopher. As everyone knows who has read either *The Summing Up* or *Of Human Bondage*, Mr. Maugham has throughout his life had a strong and far more than merely nominal interest in philosophy. For nearly a month I had the privilege of spying at close range on his philosophical reading. He has a very considerable and discriminating philosophical library which shows every evidence, including sharp and sometimes sharp-tongued comment on the more egregious ambiguities of philosophy, of having been carefully read. And I remember in the evening after dinner and lounging in the sunlight after a swim having discussions on the true, the good, and the beautiful. The Mediterranean sunlight fortified in me the conviction that Mr. Maugham was a philosopher and that we were both virtually Greek philosophers.

There is a second and deeper sense in which our distinguished visitor evokes reflection on the theme of the philosopher as man of letters or, perhaps, the man of letters as philosopher. There is a certain kind of realistic resignation blended with realistic hedonism and with an inextinguishable homesickness for the eternal that in various ways has appeared in Somerset Maugham's tales, and there is an explicit modest

credo on these matters at the conclusion of his *Notebooks*, published last year. Our new Honorary Member would be the first one to disclaim being, in the professional sense, a philosopher, as he disclaims his capacity to be a poet. But it is to poetry and philosophy that his deepest pieties are attached. Since this is so, it seems to me not inappropriate that on this occasion, instead of giving him an unnecessary introduction, for the members of this Institute are presumed to know how to read (and certainly no one who knows how to read has not read Mr. Maugham, save perhaps the Queen of England who once informed his brother, the Lord Chancellor, that, though she had not read any of Mr. Maugham's works, she has looked at all of them) — that, instead of gratuitously introducing our guest, I am sure he will not mind if I use this occasion to reflect on the theme of the relationship between philosophy and literature.

In the popular and in the academic mind philosophy and literature have long been regarded as antithetical. Long ago Plato said in the *Republic*, "There is an ancient enmity between poetry and philosophy". For Plato, poet though he was, in his moralistic severities in the *Republic* felt that the enmity consisted in the fact that philosophers, perhaps properly, regarded poets as truants from rationality and poets regarded philosophers as bleakly abstract and dialectical. There is a modern enmity between poetry and philosophy, too, and I am here using 'poet' in the broadest sense of 'man of letters' as the Greeks used the word 'poet' for an imaginative 'maker', and in this use poet includes tellers of tales, essayists, aphorists, and dramatists, as well as poets. The poet intent on the exact image and on the evocative phrase has a great suspicion of philosophers who can speak only in the most imageless generalities, who seem deliberately to use a jargon and a jabberwocky useful only in professional philosophical controversy. Poets do not normally take to Hegel or to Herbert Spencer, and with reason. You all remember — which is the academic euphemism for saying you all ought to

know — Spencer's definition of evolution in *First Principles*: "Evolution is an integration of matter and a dissipation of motion during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation". Now what on earth would a poet be doing with such language? What would he make of it? What use would he have for it? No wonder poets have not so much been contemptuous of philosophers as sedulously eager to avoid their society, even in print.

Philosophers in the contemporary world, on the other hand, have not been too tolerant of poets or of men of letters. W. C. Empson discovered seven types of ambiguities in poetry. Philosophers discover seventy-seven or more. They agree with Plato, who has Socrates say in the *Ion*, "God took away the minds of poets that they might better speak His". To a philosopher a poet seems literally not to know what he is talking about, for, when you ask him to explain it in the rational prose of a philosopher, he is paralyzed. "A primrose by the river's brim" remains a simple primrose to him, and if you ask him to explain it or to be more precise about it, he feels hurt and not understood. Even when poets grow intellectually pretentious or when men of letters have ideas, usually fifty years obsolescent, they are likely, from a philosophical point of view, to be living beyond their intellectual income and to have lost the grace of art without having gained the strength of wisdom.

It is unfortunate that this civil war in the commonwealth of letters should have taken place. For all Plato's strictures on poets in his *Dialogues*, poetry and philosophy are inextricably and enchantingly one. In Lucretius and Dante, poetry and philosophy are inseparable. In the long tradition of philosophy in both England and France, the most serious matter was presented in the most perfected of styles. One has but to remember Hobbes, Berkeley, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill or, today, Bertrand Russell. They provide the



sharp pleasures of lucidity and, in the case of some of them, like Bishop Berkeley, grace and charm as well. It is only lately that philosophers have thought it argued profundity to write badly or obscurely. On the other hand, one has but to go back through French literature and philosophy to see how intertwined thought and letters are. Is Pascal a thinker or a writer? He is clearly both. Descartes is a model of writing as well as thinking and, to come nearly to our own times, even when one disagrees with Bergson logically, one is persuaded by his exquisite art.

Meanwhile, the man of letters, above all perhaps the storyteller, is a philosopher despite himself, even when he eschews all pretentious theorizing. What he chooses to tell is itself a kind of philosophic commitment — his residual sense of human beings, his tolerance, his confusion, his awareness of their weaknesses, their glory and their tragedy. In all these implicit ways, a man of letters is a philosopher, he has his ultimate comment on life, but his commentary is a picture, his judgment has the fascination of a well-told tale. Mr. Maugham is a celebrated storyteller. His stories are exercises in humane wisdom, or philosophy at its best.

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## II

### CRITICISM

#### THE EXOTICISM OF SOMERSET MAUGHAM

MARCHAND, Leslie A. Associate Professor of English, Rutgers University. Born in Bridgeport, Wash., 1900. Author: Articles on Lord Byron's life and work in *The Listener*, *The Spectator*, *The Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. Reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* and the *Nation*. Books: *The Athenæum: A Mirror of Victorian Culture*, 1941; *The Letters of Thomas Hood*, 1945; *Selected Poetry of Lord Byron*, 1951.

The European exotic writers have found in the outposts of the Pacific islands and the strange environments East of Suez much that their temperaments and literary philosophies have disposed them to seek. Pierre Loti, driven by the restless urges of his disenchanted soul to Tahiti and Nagasaki, found in each the same nourishment for the sweet lethargic melancholy that was with him like a shadow in France as well as in the far places of the earth. And unwittingly he imposed on the unselfconscious children of nature (whether fisher folk of Brittany or Noble Savages like Rarahu) his own poignant sensitivity while he praised the enviable happiness of those who live with confused thoughts, by instinct and habit.

Stevenson savoured the *joie de vivre*, which he had built solidly into his literary philosophy, in every contact he made in the South Seas. The almost unperturbed and childlike enjoyment of the scene before him, the ever fresh vigour of his spirit — unstaled though sometimes deeply troubled — was brought along with him on the yacht *Casco*. It was with such equipment that he recovered from disillusion and adjusted himself to every new environment; it was with that

same eye of enthusiastic discovery that he saw men and donkeys in the Cevennes, the bay of Nuka Hiva for the first time, and the character of that childlike tyrant of the atolls, Tembinok. If he failed to feel the darkly passionate undercurrents which others have felt beating like a throbbing pulse through lands of 'les parsesses et les caresses', it was because he had not brought with him a developed interest or a literary technique adequate to the drama of passions.

Somerset Maugham took to the South Seas and to the closely pressed circles of white inhabitants in China a philosophy and a literary technique which had been pretty firmly fixed when he wrote *Mrs. Craddock* and *Of Human Bondage*, and before he had seen the islands of the Pacific or had thought of using the exotic background in a novel. There is evidence enough of the predispositions which determined his reactions to the exotic environment in those two volumes.

Nourished on the rather bitter disillusionments of a shy and sensitive youth, and trained by a long cultivated honesty of introspection, aided by some years of observation in a hospital, to a clinical scepticism and a cynicism frequently tempered by pity of the self-delusions of men and women in the face of their natural instincts and weaknesses, he emerged with a critical and a positive philosophy which have been the constant guides of his serious attempts in literature, from *Mrs. Craddock* to the stories in *The Casuarina Tree*.

Maugham's unvarnished introspective studies in *Of Human Bondage* laid the foundation for a literary formula to present his critical view of life which, though by no means new in realistic fiction, was sufficiently individualized to give a singular direct force to his work. That formula was so successful in gaining the attention of both the sober critical world and a public that had first been inattentive to his serious work and then tickled by what he admittedly wrote with his tongue in his cheek, that he consciously developed and extended it to objective studies. It consisted chiefly in a disconcerting and sometimes even devastating unmasking —

dispassionate and unemotionalized even when opening the way for pity — of the secret and irrational motives that trouble the currents of our common life.

There are moments in the critical reading of Maugham when the feeling comes over one that he has nothing more than an artifice of psychological profundity cloaking commonplace or melodramatic themes. I shall have occasion to refer to the point again in discussing certain of his exotic stories, but it is as well to consider here this important aspect of his work. Writing that balances so delicately on the edge of the commonplace may well give the critic pause. Is this cynical exposure of the raw and unlovely spots in human nature nothing more than a deliberate catch-penny trick, used to drape with a spurious psychological realism and universal verity both the threadbare themes of melodrama and the naturalist's customary formula? Furthermore, and this is even more disturbing, is he laughing up his cynical sleeve (though not loud enough for anyone to hear since the trick brings him money) at the gullibility of the public and the critics, who are so willing to translate their common desire for the sensational and the shocking into a belief that they are praising literary values?

Maugham says in his play *East of Suez*: "I suppose there are a few of us that wouldn't turn away from ourselves in horror if the innermost thoughts of our heart, the thoughts we're only conscious of to hate, were laid bare". Was it not natural then that his clinical interests should lead him to make that part of man's life a general preoccupation, and frequently a central interest in his novels and stories? Did he not find his best manner of 'criticism of life' in that formula, in exposing to the light and thus finding emotional relief for that side of human nature which seemed a common quality, rather than an abnormal one, to his doctorial detachment? Could it be that he felt with perfect sincerity that somehow back of those ugly qualities of the unrecognised ego, which only the tough-minded are willing to face, we can see most

clearly struggling, sometimes inchoate and sardonically futile, sometimes unromantically, even grimly successful, the common aspirations of men and women for the satisfying 'pattern of life', the search for which is the unifying and positive element in Maugham's philosophy?

It is hard enough to lay one's fingers on the individual quality that raises Maugham at his best above the two-dimensioned psychoanalytical fictionists. There is evident in his work at times, it is blindness not to admit, a conscious striving after an effect that is startling or dramatic in a pre-arranged fashion, or shockingly attractive by the very brazenness of its cynicism. It is as evident in the beginning of *The Painted Veil* and in *The Letter* as in most of his plays. That is what troubles one who believes that there is something of depth and steadfast value in the art and philosophy of Somerset Maugham. How much of the charlatan convinced that he is an honest artist is there in the man? That we cannot know; we can only say that we wish he hadn't done some things — and the wish itself is evidence of our feeling that there is something fundamentally sound and of lasting value inherent in his work. Its proper significance appears only after an acquaintance with his total personality. Then comes the consciousness that the deeper sincerity and analytic power of the writer is something which transcends the tricks of his trade, that his steady and whole vision of life is worth more than the originality of the passing hour.

Then we feel the breath of understanding vibrating the deeper chords of sympathy. It needs only that breath to blow the perennially collecting dust off the chronicle of our common life, and give significance to its staleness, its obviousness, its inconsistencies — even its melodrama.

The next question of interest, then, is this: What would a writer of such training and proclivities find attractive to his pen in the outposts, and what selection and interpretation would he make of the exotic material? I do not intend to uphold so absurd a theme as that Maugham was (as some

have said of Stevenson—and with more truth of Lafcadio Hearn) predestined to the exotic which called him irresistibly. In fact, the very opposite is to be expected of a realist. The tendency has been for the Naturalists, from Maupassant and Hardy to Galsworthy and Bennett, to stick to the home soil and to leave the Romantics to explore Ultima Thule, and write colourful tales based upon a traveller's view of life in strange parts.

It is natural to expect that something interesting and unusual will happen when a realist, particularly one with naturalist leanings, gets into the exotic field. After all, there have not been so many who have migrated. Even such a doubtful realist as Kipling, certainly with no naturalistic bee in his bonnet, could cause a considerable shock to the literary world of his day by writing of the India he had known and interpreting it through his own bizarre and blustering personality.

What will be the reactions of a writer whose formula seems to rest upon the pricking of the bubbles of conventional thought and action, to an environment in which the bubbles are already pricked, where naturalness of action, and often primitive honesty of egoistic motive, have followed upon the loss of the pride and conventions of civilization?

To be more specific, why did Maugham turn to the exotic field, what did he find there, and what literary use did he make of it? He himself considers his introduction to the South Seas and the outposts of the Far East in an unromantic though not a casual vein. I take the liberty to quote from a letter written by Mr. Maugham in answer to a query.

"The exotic background was forced upon me accidentally by the fact that during the war I was employed in the Intelligence department, and so visited parts of the world which otherwise I might not have summoned up sufficient resolution to go to. I think I had had a vague impression that so far as I was concerned, I could not write any more novels about the English scene. I had put pretty well all

my experiences into *Of Human Bondage* and I did not see how I was to follow that up. When I went down to the South Seas I came across many types that were entirely new to me, and situations that appealed to my imagination. I was very much struck by the effect of the climate and surroundings on the white people who for one reason or another had drifted there. So far as I was concerned, I seemed to be entering upon an entirely new literary life, and after the war I deliberately travelled in search of this material which seemed to offer so fruitful and new material. Perhaps it peculiarly appealed to me on account of my early years in France and other circumstances of my life, which have prevented me from ever feeling entirely at home in England".

The 'immense knowability', in Kipling's phrase, of the white residents of the outposts must in the first place have enticed one so much interested in the delicate balance of motive and conduct, the hidden springs of which white men in civilization are trained to conceal. In Europe the writer may project his own personality behind the masks, but in a hotel lobby or club room in Tahiti, or on the beach at Apia, white men, even Englishmen, are more likely to tell the unexpurgated stories of their lives, as men sometimes do to casual acquaintances in the lonely places. At least Maughan seems to have the power to draw out those secrets. The source of that power may be indicated in this from *The Pool*: "I held my breath, for to me there is nothing more awe-inspiring than when a man discovers to you the nakedness of his soul. Then you see that no one is so trivial or debased but that in him is a spark of something to excite compassion".

Judging from the stories which came out of his contact with the East, he gained there several things which had literary usefulness to him and which we must examine before we can reach a proper understanding of his work in that field. One was the discovery of new objective interests, rather important for the literary renewal of one whose serious work

had sapped the sources of personal experience and tended to drain the subjective fountain from which it chiefly drew its sustenance. He saw an interesting drama of personal life in which he was not an actor, an objective life to which he could get near — not an *objective* life either in the ordinary sense, for he is always interested in the inner consciousness. Rather he found a less completely autobiographical approach to the realization of that consciousness in others.

Another discovery which Maugham made, which any realist who casts a critical eye on the exotics is likely to make, was that there were just about as many bubbles of pretence and convention to be burst in the outposts as in the same levels of European civilization, before it was transplanted from the drawing-room to the coral strand. Though the masks, to change the figure, may have been different, they were none the less present, and all the more fascinating for their exotic colourings. Judging again from what appears in his stories, Maugham must have been attracted at first by some of the open and frank 'misbehaving' in the out-stations, and by the visible self-respect of some who had cast off the repressions together with the standards of the West. But he was fascinated too by the curious mixture and adjustment where indulgences might be neatly rationalized and yet be the cause of social ostracism; where intolerance and snobbery persist even against a background that so easily reveals them to be ridiculous.

The detachment of his point of view made him a ruthless observer at times, but gave him an advantage that a writer of the isolated places must almost of necessity have if he is to keep his critical perspective. It was that detachment which enabled him to see so clearly beneath the surface that alone is visible to the tourist, and to picture so frankly the drama of lives sundered from the formulas by which they were accustomed to live.

He felt when he first set foot in Honolulu, which is but the fringe of the insular isolation and of eastern morals, that



the respectability was only of the surface, that below was darkness and mystery.

It is true that there is nothing new in that discovery. If he had nothing more than that to offer, his work would lie wholly in a class with the popular movie versions of the hot passionate life of the tropics, and would not be worthy of our serious consideration. The fact is that Maugham's work translated into cinema drama does rest just there; that is, it is simple melodrama unrelieved and unshaded by the overtones of critical intelligence which inform his pages. The lurid simplicity of sensual indulgence is the stock in trade of the shilling shocker; that is merely the starting point for Maugham's stories of the island world of the Pacific. With his background of clinical calmness and his ability to sense the reality in human action, he cannot have been greatly surprised at discovering such a world. He comments on it only casually because his general observations of life are confirmed. What struck him as more worthy of notice than that there was a secret life beneath the surface of respectability, was that there was a surface, a crust or veneer of rationalized propriety overlaying and dominating the tone of the supposedly freer, and (in the cinema version), luridly unbridled life in the white settlements of the East.

Frequently, too, he found the process reversed: the degradation was of the surface, was but the mask for the true life. Beneath the observable abandon lay the inner respectability (self-respect). Judging from the space given them in his exotic tales, two aspects of that life chiefly interested him. One was the subtle oozing away of ambitions where the urges of civilization are not forever prodding a reluctant human nature. The other was the arising of dramatic situations from the primitive call to white men in the East, isolated and freed from the fear of external pressure, to indulge passions that, without chance of sublimation, distort the perspective and colour the imagination, so that they give a 'thrill like the beating of a drum in the forest'.

Though it is in *The Fall of Edward Barnard* that he is most outspoken in his presentation of the contentment that may follow a bold casting aside of the ambitions imposed by civilization, examples are abundant in Maugham's exotic work of equally satisfactory adjustments to the easy-going life. Not all of the white residents of the outposts which he has chosen to represent were as deliberate in their choice, or as articulate in their defence of the unhurried ease of the island world, as was Edward Barnard. Lawson, in *The Pool*, came out to Samoa filled with ambition to make a success of his job and return home. Gradually that ambition ebbed away, and though the problems of his life were further complicated by his alliance with a native woman, his downfall began with his slipping into the lenient mood of the islands.

While in *The Pool* and *The Force of Circumstance* we see white men degraded and eventually crushed by their loss of pride and ambition, in stories such as *Red* and *Honolulu*, though there is not the glorying in the unambitious life that we find in Edward Barnard, there is at least a calm acceptance of it as a condition which has its compensations.

Of the dramatic situations arising from the exaggerated importance of the passions in isolated communities which provide them no safety valve, one of the most striking is that of the intense hatred developed between Warburton and Cooper in the isolation of *The Outstation*. The extreme intensity of love and sexual passion in *The Letter*, in *Rain*, in *The Painted Veil*, and in the play *East of Suez*, is evidence enough of Maugham's interest in this aspect of the influence of the exotic environment on the white population.

But his interest in white men out of civilization leads neither to idealization nor to criticism of the primitive. It is only occasionally that one glimpses the deterministic background, and then it is hardly ever external; the determinism is from within, deeply seated in the normal proclivities or perversities of human nature. No great point is ever made of an enervating climate, of an impersonal physical environment

that takes the centre of the stage. Maugham's persons are too responsible to their inner lives to be puppets of any large measure of outer circumstance. And yet, ego-centric and autobiographic by nature and long practice, he never completely identifies his point of view with that of his objective personalities in this strange new sphere. Perhaps that fact opens the way for an understanding of a defect, or at least a weakness, in his character portrayal. His persons are 'cases' whom he analyzes in the impersonal laboratory manner. He looks with cynicism and pity at the spectacle of their self-duping. Rarely does he merge his personality in theirs to achieve that complete sympathy which is one of the marks of a great novelist. We are almost inclined to blame his people, even when we know that he doesn't want us to, or at least to reproach them for attempting to mask the baseness of thoughts and desires under the pretence of respectability and unselfishness.

That clinical aloofness was at once his weakness and his strength in dealing with the exotic scene. He says in *Ashenden; or the British Agent*, which is obviously autobiographical: "Ashenden admired goodness but was not outraged by wickedness". And again, "He was more often interested in others than attached to them". That bit of self-analysis seems to throw some light on his actual contacts with, and his reactions to, the white settlements of the East. It is remarkable that Maugham succeeded in living in Papeete so unnoticed. One observer wrote from there that no one seemed to remember much about him; he seemed to be mostly listening and observing. Not even the fat lady who dispensed drinks at the hotel bar, and who was the innocent original of a devastatingly true picture in *The Moon and Sixpence* — not even she remembered more than a casual word or two.

As a critic, Maugham really had an advantage in that society where "everyone seems to know everyone's business", for, while he lived there long enough to get an understand-

ing of the life and a measure of feeling for it, he was never in danger of losing perspective, of succumbing to its easy-going habits, of adjusting himself to its confident feeling that its affairs are all that really count, as he would have been if he had expected to live there the rest of his life, like Stevenson.

It is probable that a man of his temperament could not for long have become wholly wrapped up in the preoccupations of that lazy island world, however much he might have eulogized it in that general way we have, of idealizing whatever, in a sphere remote from our own, can by contrast throw a shadow upon the elements of our daily routine, with which we are dissatisfied. A great part of the attractiveness of this milieu must have been simply that it furnished an excellent opportunity for the study of a society in miniature, wherein some of the values we are accustomed to are reversed. And momentarily he is attached to the scene. But the *Envoi*, though tinged with sadness and a thought of regret, is inevitably this: "When the ship moves slowly away, the streamers break softly, and it is like the breaking of human ties. Men and women are joined together for a moment by a gaily coloured strip of paper . . . and then life separates them and the paper is sundered, so easily . . .".

While Maugham is usually, in theory, on the side of the primitive when it comes to a weighing of the merits of civilization against the less strenuously moralistic life of the outstations, his cynically clear eyes seldom permit him to idealize the natives or the whites. He has a certain contempt for the arrogance of the white men and women in the East who, though they have lived there for years, have made no attempt to learn anything of the language or customs of the people among whom they live, but are content to bask in their superiority. "Why", says Lee Tai in *East of Suez*, "when you lived in caves and clothed yourselves with skins, we were a cultured people". In *The Painted Veil*, Maugham speaks not unsympathetically of, though he doesn't pass

judgment on "the Chinese view that the Europeans were barbarians and their life a folly".

Whenever he generalizes he is on the side of the primitive as against the civilized, perhaps because he is more disposed to tolerance of 'natural goodness', even when it isn't so good, and the pagan ideal of life, than of the hypocrisy and dogma which he sees accompanying the ideal of duty. To one who searches for tranquillity and a satisfying pattern of life, most of the struggles of civilization are hardly worth the candle. A general philosophy that could easily apply to the South Seas is expressed in *The Land of the Blessed Virgin*, sketches of Andalusia.

"And the thought impressed itself upon me while I lingered in that peaceful spot, that there was far more to be said for the simple pleasures of sense that northern folk would have us believe. The English have still much of that ancient puritanism that finds a vague sinfulness in the uncostly delights of sunshine and colour, and ease of mind. It is well occasionally to leave the eager turmoil of great cities for such a place as this, where one may learn that there are other, more natural ways of living, that it is possible still to spend long days, undisturbed by restless passion, without regret or longing, content in the various show that nature offers, asking only that the sun should shine and that happy seasons run their course".

But I could take exception to the conclusion of Mr. H. T. Craven in his *Bookman* article on *Tahiti from Melville to Maugham*, when he says that: "Brilliantly cynical about civilized human nature, nature without the adjectives disarms him completely".\* His critical eye has never gone to sleep when he was dealing with the effect of the exotic environment on individual white men and women. He was sufficiently alive to the charm of the Pacific, but he was never 'disarmed' to the point of making a romantic picture, even of the scenery. The idealizations of the state of nature are those

\**Bookman* (London) November, 1919.

made by his characters; for them he takes no direct responsibility.

When Edward Barnard extols the peaceful life on the coral island that he hopes to make his home, he exclaims: "In my small way I too shall have lived in beauty". He will have books and a loving wife (native), tasks that are self-imposed, and above all: "... the infinite variety and the beauty of the sunset, and the rich magnificence of the night".

Maugham speaks eloquently enough in his own person, though still with his customary reserve, of his introduction to Tahiti in *The Moon and Sixpence*. The physical environment always seems to heighten the sense of loneliness, or to sharpen, at the same time that it beautifies, models of anguish or despair. "The Pacific is more desolate than other seas; its spaces seem more vast, and the most ordinary journey upon it has somehow the feeling of an adventure. The air you breathe is an elixir which prepares you for the unexpected. Nor is it vouchsafed to man in the flesh to know aught that more nearly suggests the approach of the golden realms of fancy than the approach to Tahiti. . . .

"Tahiti is a lofty green island, with deep folds of a darker green, in which you divine silent valleys; there is a mystery in their sombre depths, down which murmur and plash cool streams, and you feel that in those umbrageous places life from immemorial times has been led according to immemorial ways. Even here is something sad and terrible. But the impression is fleeting, and serves only to give a greater acuteness to the enjoyment of the moment. It is like the sadness which you may see in the jester's eyes when a merry company is laughing at his sallies; his lips smile and his jokes are gayer because in the communion of laughter he finds himself more intolerably alone".

That is a finely drawn but hardly a romantic picture.

His expatriate Englishman in *The Pool* basks momentarily in the idyllic freedom of the native life of Samoa. "It was more natural than any life he had known, it was nearer to

the friendly fertile earth; civilization repelled him at that moment, and by mere contact with these creatures of a more primitive nature he felt a greater freedom". Yet even that idyll of Apia ends in tragedy which was preparing in many a scene before the last. Practically, this is about as near as he comes to casting the light of romantic attractiveness over the picture. The tranquillity of the 'state of nature' rests but fitfully on the whites, and even on the few Noble Savages that have a prominent place in his stories; sometimes because of the ravages of isolation among those unused to existing on the sustenance of their own minds, or on simple un compelling objective tasks; sometimes because of the necessity of making adjustments with a strange new life, when the habits and moral sense of the old are embedded too deeply to allow entire surrender or even a happy compromise; and often because of an even more trying necessity of adjusting the freedoms to which the primitive invites, to the standards which have been deserted, but which follow relentlessly after the deserter in the white settlements of the East.

To Maugham, tranquillity does not come as a natural gift in isolated spots. He was not one, after all, who found rest for his soul and a meaning in life in contact with a less sophisticated *milieu*. In *Of Human Bondage* he came to the conclusion that life has no meaning, no plan or purpose imposed upon it from without — there is only the pattern which we ourselves weave from the fragments of temperaments and circumstance at our command. He didn't find 'peace' (as the heroes of most popular novels do in communion with nature) in the Pacific. He found only the restless urge of the life force whose optimism transcends philosophy and reason, and whose promise is always the unknown. And a certain melancholy accompanies his awareness of the trick. "The Pacific is inconstant and uncertain like the soul of man. . . . The trade wind gets into your blood and you are filled with an impatience for the unknown. The billows magnificently rolling, stretch widely on all sides of

you, and you forget your vanished youth, with its memories, cruel and sweet, in a restless, intolerable desire for life . . . and presently the emptiness fills you with a vague foreboding”.

With that aspect of his philosophy clearly before one, and it forcibly presents itself to any student of Maugham's exotic work, the story called *The Fall of Edward Barnard* will seem at first sight perhaps to be a romantic, or an ironic, anomaly. It pictures tranquillity achieved by complete loss of ambition, and the casting aside of the standards of success and striving. In ridiculing the ideals of Chicago, it is almost uncritical of the life of white men among the Noble Savages. But it requires only a second glance to show that its tone is not incompatible with that of Maugham's other work. After all, the spectacle of peaceful existence among the natives is seen through the perspective of his characters. He is willing, too, to restrain his more searching criticism of that existence for the sake of contrasting the simple life with the emptiness of striving toward the dull ends of civilization. Though the character of Strickland is far different from that of Edward Barnard, the same implications rest on the back of his settlement in Papeete, and of his disdain of success or a lasting monument in his art. If he did not exactly count the world well-lost for the freedom and friendliness of the Pacific islands, he felt at least that the payment of energies and restraints demanded by civilization in the name of duty was excessive for rewards that were to him ironic and futile.

The exotic background, then, furnished Maugham an excellent field for the expansion in concrete and easily conceived detail of the philosophy, critical and positive, which was expressed or inherent in all his serious work, before he became acquainted with the exotic scene. He found there abundant and attractively dramatic instances of that disparity between the surface picture and the truth of fact, motive, and desire, which as a realist he had become chiefly interested in revealing. There was rich illustrative material for a thesis



that had already been elaborated from sensitive reactions to early disillusion.

In the human material of the outposts, and in the situations confronting the white settlers of the East, he found opportunities as well for the concrete illustration of a positive thesis, whose origin also dates from an earlier period. As he was ready to praise by contrast the more honest, the less self-deceptive, life of the 'down and out', of those who were the antithesis of the sturdily complacent and dutybound, so was he ready to point out that tranquillity and a pattern, alone in his philosophy worth the seeking, are easier to find in the wreckage when ideals of success and propriety are cast aside. When Philip Carey, with something like a sigh of relief, had freed himself from his last illusion, and from the last urgent call of passion, he was ready to embark upon a new life that promised less of ardour and striving, more of felicity in the enjoyment of simple pleasures unromanticised. Mrs. Craddock, freed likewise from an ideal of conduct set up for her by others, and from slavery to her own too ardent desire for repletion and perfection in the experiences of life and love, is ready at the end of the book to begin her life anew, guided by an honest realism that stabilizes her emotions and prevents her from asking or expecting too much.

The same formula and the same process, it seems to me, were followed by Maugham in his handling of exotic material. Certainly one may find a close parallel to this theme in the residuum of calm that rests with some of the characters in his stories of the Pacific, mainly after they had experienced the shock of a harrowing upheaval in their personal lives such as the exotic environment so frequently precipitates. Edward Barnard is not the only one who finds a quiet, tempered happiness in a clear-eyed surrender of excessive demands. It is in realizing unsentimentally the extent of human limitations that Mrs. Hamlyn (in the story *P. & O.*) saves herself from the agony of feeling that, deserted by her husband, there is for her no more interest in living. With her

realistic view comes equilibrium of mental and emotional attitude. For her life had not ended; it had just begun.

In *The Painted Veil*, Kitty Fane, in the final mood which the book shows us, reaches forth to embrace her disillusioned world with a quiet enthusiasm for what it may offer. Though Maugham does not insist upon the point, the circumstances of her life in the East aided her to develop an honesty with herself which her former environment might easily have frustrated. Civilization expects us to temper our reactions to experience and suffering in a manner that sometimes leads to bitterness. But in a strange environment the individual is left to seek his own salvation. The last tangled threads of her old life were torn out of the loom before Kitty began to weave a new design in more natural colours. These are the patterns, we may take it, that Maugham personally thinks of value. They are woven from the threads whose dyes are of fast colour; they will not fade as the more gaudy ones do. "I see in front of me", Mrs. Fane says, "the glorious fun of the world. . . . It's all confused, but vaguely I discern a pattern, and I see before me an inexhaustible richness, the mystery and the strangeness of everything . . .".

It is not strange, after all, that Maugham should come to accept the literary aesthete's view of life as an art. It is an ultimate compromise in the logic of the disenchanted, demanded by the life force — the embracing of the fiction that one illusion differs in kind and is superior to all others. His spokesman in *The Painted Veil* says: "I have an idea that the only thing which makes it possible to regard this world we live in without disgust is the beauty which now and then men create out of the chaos. The pictures they paint, the music they compose, the books they write, and the lives they lead. Of all these the richest in beauty is the beautiful life. That is the perfect work of art".

If at times the cynicism of his work overrides sympathy; if the cumulative evidence he presents of the basic savagery of human nature disturbs the dream that everyone, however

disillusioned, tries to build from desire on the wrecked foundations of his faith in himself and the human animal, it is because Maugham's temperament is such that he derives more real pleasure from looking behind the scenes at the melancholy comedy of illusions, than from elaborating his own fiction of escape. For such a one the exotic scene could scarcely change the nature of the comedy. Exoticism did not perceptibly colour Maugham's thinking or modify his method. It was rather a useful medium, but it never subdued or chastened him. The tone of his work remains constant.

From *The Revue Anglo-Américaine* (1933).

## AN APPRECIATION

SPENCER, Theodore. Professor of English. Born in Villanova, Pa., 1902-1949. Author: *Death and Elizabethan Tragedy*, 1936; *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, 1942; *Poems*, 1940-1947.

One of the difficulties involved in writing a critical essay on Somerset Maugham is that he seems to have made such an estimate unnecessary by writing it himself. In a number of prefaces and especially in *The Summing Up*, he has described his career, stated his beliefs, and defined his limitations. He has been as honest with his readers as he has been with himself.

Though I have had variety of invention, and this is not strange since it is the outcome of the variety of mankind, I have had small power of imagination. I have taken living people and put them into the situations, tragic or comic, that their characters suggested. I might well say that they invented their own stories. I have been incapable of those great, sustained flights that carry the author on broad pinions into a celestial sphere. My fancy, never very strong, has been hampered by my sense of probability. I have painted easel pictures, not frescoes.

Such frankness, as Maugham himself points out, is likely to be dangerous to a writer's reputation. The Anglo-Saxon public likes its authors to have some mystery or romance surrounding them, to be less explicit and less rational about themselves than Maugham has been; it is not wise for an English writer to show that he has too much common sense. "Anthony Trollope ceased to be read for thirty years because he confessed that he wrote at regular hours and took care to get the best price he could for his work". And it is true that Maugham has been slighted or ignored by the critics. "In my twenties the critics said I was brutal, in my thirties they said I was flippant, in my forties they said I was cynical, in

my fifties they said I was competent, and now in my sixties they say I am superficial". But the critics have not only branded Maugham with unflattering epithets; they have done something more harmful to his reputation than that — they have neglected him by putting him on one side of the main current of literature in his age. The age has been an age of experiment, and criticism has followed many of the writers in being more interested in experiment than in accomplishment along relatively traditional lines. It is easier to make critical comments on experimental than on conventional writing; there is more to explain and therefore more to say. And recent critics have been so conditioned by the historical sense, by the feeling that literary art, like evolutionary biology, must be continually developing new forms if it is to progress, that they conclude that an author who does not experiment with new forms is worth little attention. Most histories of contemporary literature give only a brief notice to Maugham.

But Maugham deserves better than this, and popular opinion has recognized the fact by not agreeing with the critics. One of Maugham's books, *Of Human Bondage*, is probably the most universally read and admired of modern English novels, and his plays have more vitality than those of any of his contemporaries, except Shaw. The problem for anyone trying to judge Maugham's permanent value is to decide whether the critics or the public are right.

In *The Summing Up* Maugham discusses his work under four main headings: style, drama, fiction, and philosophy. The division is a convenient one for a discussion of Maugham's merits. His style is one of his most individual characteristics; it is natural, fluent, and colloquial. But it was not formed without difficulty. In his earliest writings, such as *Liza of Lambeth*, the style is barely adequate to the description of the material, and there are passages even in his later works which are clumsy and occasionally almost ridiculous: "Her delicate features, the aristocratic shortness of her upper lip, and her wealth of fair hair suggested the marquise

again, and it must have been obvious, even if it were not notorious, that in her veins flowed the best blood in Chicago".

But a sentence like this is exceptional in Maugham's mature writing; for the most part his sentences say what he wants them to say in an economical and efficient manner. Though they are by his own confession the result of hard work, they seem natural and easy; what is perhaps more important, they reflect an individuality which is clearly recognizable. Maugham's tone is that of a man talking to a friend in a club; it is anecdotal, and conceals its real economy under an air of apparent garrulity. Occasionally this informality, this attitude of a somewhat artificially benevolent gossip, is overdone, and in the effort to be as natural as possible Maugham falls into a kind of artificiality in reverse. He has his technique so much at his finger ends that by playing with it as a child plays with a toy his deftness now and then defeats its purpose, and we sometimes feel that his way of saying a thing is more important to him than what he has to say. For example, in the short story called *Virtue*, which tells how a woman's passion for a young man on leave from the East destroys her marriage and wrecks her life, Maugham begins with the sentence, "There are few things better than a good Havana", and only after a series of reflections on the labour required to produce man's pleasures, and the enormous consequences attendant on trivial incidents, does he eventually come to the story itself. He uses the same device of informality in *Cakes and Ale* and in several of his later books, and, though it is captivating and disarming on a first reading, it has often lost its charm when we re-read.

This deftness of style is of course closely connected with a technical deftness on a larger scale — the deftness with which Maugham orders his events and manipulates the sequence of his actions. Particularly in such later novels as *Cakes and Ale* and *Christmas Holiday*, Maugham carries over into the arrangement of his plot the same studied informality and deliberate casualness which is so charac-

teristic of his verbal style. He moves from one chronological level to another and back again with the agility of an acrobat — and it is a pleasure for anyone concerned with craftsmanship to watch the dexterity of his movements and the general niftiness — there is no other word — of his manner. Watching Maugham move about among the elements of his later stories is like watching a fish in the water; both are completely at home. It is this which the critics refer to when they describe him as 'competent'. It is this too which perhaps justifies them in not applying, at least to Maugham's later fiction, a more enthusiastic adjective. We tend to become suspicious of a verbal or narrative technique that is too smoothly oiled or that moves with so obvious an efficiency; we wonder if our pleasure does not come rather from seeing the acrobat move than from reflecting upon the significance of his movements. Maugham's later technique is a technique that almost deliberately limits his emotional range; it is admirably adapted for irony, for dispassionate observation, for swift-moving narrative, for a tolerant, common-sense, man-of-the-world point of view. But it is not a technique that is of much use in describing strong feeling or passionate thought; it perhaps defines Maugham's limitations to say that it is impossible to think of any of his later stories (I am excluding *Of Human Bondage*) as being in any way symbolic of a great or general human situation. They are always in prose; poetry does not touch them as poetry touches the novels of Tolstoy, of Thomas Mann, or even Hardy. T. S. Eliot has said of Hardy's writing that it sometimes reaches sublimity without having passed through the stage of being good. Maugham's prose is frequently good but never reaches sublimity. His stories are limited in time and, as it were, limited in space — they have no fourth dimension. It is this deficiency no doubt to which Maugham refers when he says that he has had "small power of imagination". His picture of the artist in *The Moon and Sixpence*, and that of the novelist in *Cakes and Ale*, are pictures of particular

artists in particular situations, not of the artist in general; in his presentation of them we miss the final probing insight which reveals the universal through the particular.

Maugham's career as a novelist falls roughly into two main periods: the first from *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), through *Of Human Bondage* (1915); the second from *Cakes and Ale* (1922), through *Christmas Holiday* (1939), including the short stories. The best novels of the first period, *Liza* and *Mrs. Craddock*, are straightforward books in the late-nineteenth-century realistic tradition. They have two main virtues: their dialogue is natural and convincing, and their main characters are firmly and clearly conceived. *Mrs. Craddock*, for example, tells the story of a young mistress of a manor — ardent, handsome, and passionate — who falls in love with a young farmer almost solely on physical grounds, marries him, and discovers that they are temperamentally, and hence in every other way, unsuited to each other. The development of this misunderstanding, the way Mrs. Craddock's sensitive and high-strung nature continually dashes itself, only to its own harm, on the rock of her husband's uncomprehending and complacent stolidity — this is excellently done, and the character of the husband, particularly, remains firmly in the reader's memory. It is not, of course, a great novel, but it is a solid piece of work, filling with no gaps and no slopping-over at the edges the somewhat limited frame that was planned for it.

The later novels are quite different. Their technique is much more personal, and so is their tone; their structure is not so tight, and they have about them an air of easy freedom which is partly the result of technical deftness and partly the result of Maugham's own attitude to his characters and to his subject. Maugham makes a great deal of use of the first person singular. To consider how he does this is perhaps the best way to describe his merits and limitations.

All novelists are concerned with the problem of point of view — the problem of where to stand, and make the reader



stand, when considering events and characters. The use of the first person — though some novelists, like Henry James, have attacked it — is one of the most obvious and one of the most valuable answers to the problem. It not only gives versimilitude and direction; it also gives a particular tone. Dostoevsky, for example, uses it in this fashion very cleverly: the unnamed and, on the whole, unobtrusive narrator in *The Possessed* is an all-knowing gossip who reports conversations and actions as he has heard and seen them and who, in addition to being an eye-witness, is a kind of commentator, chorus, or representative of the normal points of view in the middle of violent and outrageous occurrences. Conrad — in a more indirect way — does the same thing through the character of Marlow, who is an objectification of Conrad's own attitude to the situation he describes.

Maugham uses the first person singular in all three ways: to make the story sound as if it actually happened, to give it a particular tone or philosophical atmosphere, and to add the salt of a more normal point of view to the otherwise unreasoned violence or peculiarity of the main characters. As a result Maugham's "I" is often one of the most important figures in the narrative. He generalizes about human nature, reveals his personal habits and tastes, and directs our feelings toward the action.

The character of that direction is what, to a great extent, limits the range of these later novels. It reflects pretty closely Maugham's own attitude to life, which, after all, is only a more mellow version of the philosophy he had arrived at when he was a medical student: "I learnt that men were moved by a savage egoism, that love was only the dirty trick nature played on us to achieve the continuation of the species, and I decided that, whatever aims men set themselves, they were deluded, for it was impossible for them to aim at anything but their own selfish pleasures". The "I" of the later novels, to be sure, is not so harsh as that — he has had his edges rubbed smooth by worldly success, and he is more

ready to recognize human goodness. But the basic view is the same, and as a result Maugham's picture of human nature is, as I have said, limited. It makes one very important omission; it leaves out moral struggle and the grandeur that comes from moral struggle. Maugham's people are swayed by various motives — vanity, passion, ambition — but, since there is no real standard of action in a world that has no meaning, there is nothing for them to aim for, and they are merely to be observed tolerantly and somewhat ironically as they are caught in the current of their desires.

The same thing is true of Maugham's best plays. The drama, even perhaps more than fiction, demands a standard. If only a social standard, against which individual behaviour can be seen; if the standard is not there, the conflict essential to drama is likely to disappear. Maugham realizes this, and a social standard is presented; but it is — as in *Caesar's Wife*, for example — an *ad hoc* standard, something which Maugham puts in because he realizes it is necessary for his drama rather because it is part of his belief. That is why many of his plays, successful as they are, too obviously seem 'made'; they do not give us (with one or two exceptions, such as *The Sacred Flame*) that sense of organic unity which we feel in the finest drama. The standards or conventions used by Maugham are, as far as his own beliefs are concerned, out of date, which is one way of saying that he sometimes gives the impression of being insincere.

Maugham has often remarked that he considers it his chief function as a novelist merely to entertain; it is one of the several confessions that have turned the critics against him. They have said that Maugham, after writing *Of Human Bondage*, made, artistically speaking, *il gran rifiuto* and, by thinking of his job on such a relatively low level, removed himself from serious consideration. This, however — in spite of what I have been saying about the limitations of his later novels — is neither entirely fair nor entirely true. Maugham never again chose so large a canvas or planned so deep a set

of perspectives because he never again had the materials to fill in; it was only sensible of him to limit his scale to the 'easel pictures' he could so cleverly, and often so delightfully, compose.

I have excluded *Of Human Bondage* from the foregoing remarks because it is by common consent Maugham's best novel and the one which gives him a claim to being considered a first-class writer. It remains to be seen whether this claim can be justified.

There are, we may say, four things which we look for in a serious work of fiction: (1) an organization of incident which produces the illusion that the sequence of events is necessary and inevitable; (2) a set of characters whose relation to the events is equally inevitable and in whom we can believe; (3) a physical, social, or geographical setting which forms a fitting background for the events and characters; and (4) a moral, intellectual, or metaphysical climate which creates the standard by which, more or less unconsciously, both the author and the reader judge the behaviour of the characters. This last requirement, one which is usually overlooked, may be for a certain type of novel the most important of all. For example, the implications of the characters and the action in *Moby Dick* are in a sense more significant than the action that the characters perform. They universalize the individual events by giving them a symbolic meaning; we have, in other words, the feeling of a fourth dimension to which I have already referred. The problem in criticizing *Of Human Bondage* is to determine whether or not this quality can be found in it or whether it is merely, like the *Forsyte Saga*, a kind of sublimated reporting limited to a given time and place.

There is no doubt about the conviction of reality which we receive from the book; Philip Carey's childhood, his uncle, the school at Tercanbury, his years abroad, and his struggle to find a satisfactory way of existence are all described with honesty, fidelity, and conviction. The material is almost

entirely autobiographical, and Maugham has told us himself that he was virtually forced to write the book in order to get the subject matter out of his system. The difference between the first three-quarters of the book and the last quarter, the part describing Philip's marriage, which, according to Maugham, is largely wish fulfilment, shows how necessary it is for Maugham, if he is to write convincingly, to rely fairly solidly on what he himself has seen and felt. For the last section of the book, 'competent' as it is, has not the strength and the authority of the earlier part. Like the happy ending of Hardy's *Return of the Native*, it is a kind of excrescence on the original organic structure.

It is, then, the first three-quarters of the book, that we must consider most seriously. Apart from the fact that we can believe without question in the people and the events which Maugham describes, there are two things in this part of the novel which impress most readers: the love affair with Mildred, and the search for a pattern in human experience. There is no doubt that Maugham's description of his hero's violent infatuation has more intensity than that which he has given to any other similar situation. The *odi et amo* of Catullus has found no more vivid presentation in modern fiction than this. The contrast between the strength of emotion and the unworthiness of its object, which is one of the most painful of human experiences, Maugham here describes in a manner which all who have shared that experience can recognize. Not only are the individual scenes between Mildred and Philip admirably handled, but their sequence — the development of the relation between the two — is as psychologically true as it is powerfully described.

And yet, excellent as it is, if we compare it with another handling of the same situation, it may perhaps be clear why it is difficult to attribute to Maugham's description the final, inner artistic vision which I have mentioned as the fourth requirement of a great novel. When Shakespeare's *Troilus* realizes that his Cressida is unworthy of his feelings for her,

he makes that realization the opening wedge for a frightening view into the gulf between appearance and reality which involves every range of thought and feeling. To him it is merely one aspect of a whole view of life; the most excruciating, but not the only, evidence of the gap between what the will and the mind can desire and what the limited, hampering body can perform.

Shakespeare, of course, is writing a poetic drama, not a novel, and as a result he has more opportunity for creating poetic intensity. The comparison between him and Maugham has only a limited value. Nevertheless, there is a 'fourth-dimensional' character to Shakespeare's view of Troilus which is missing in Maugham's view of Philip, and we must recognize this lack if we are to keep our standards clear. The difference, to be sure, is not merely a difference in individual ability or vision; it is also a reflection of a difference between two periods in history. Shakespeare's world was based on a concept of unity; when that unity, through the realization of individual perfidy, was apparently smashed, tragedy was the result. Maugham's age gave him no unity; the only order known to Philip — that of his uncle's beliefs — was a shoddy sort of order, and the smashing of it brought, not tragedy, but freedom. Life, like the famous Persian rug given to Philip by Cronshaw, has no pattern at all. "Life was insignificant and death without consequence", Philip discovers; and the discovery is a release and a satisfaction: "His significance was turned to power, and he felt himself suddenly equal with the cruel fate which had seemed to persecute him; for, if life was meaningless, the world was robbed of its cruelty. . . . He had not been so happy for months".

Obviously this kind of resolution lacks the intensity of a tragic resolution, and the success of *Of Human Bondage* as a whole is a limited success. It has not, for example, the lyrical intensity which we sometimes find in such a comparable work as Arnold Bennett's *Old Wives' Tale*; there is nothing in Maugham like Sophia's reflections over the body

of Gerald Scales. *Of Human Bondage* is not one of those novels which press us urgently into new areas of awareness; it merely fills out, in its moving, efficient, and vivid way, those areas of awareness which we already possess. Superior as it is to anything else Maugham has written, it is still, to use his own words, an 'easel picture' and not a 'fresco'.

Maugham has rounded out his life's work in his intellectual and artistic autobiography, *The Summing Up*. We find here, as we would expect, a reflection of the same temperament that is expressed in the novels. It is an admirable book; sensible, clear, and full of an honest and not too worldly wisdom. Next to *Of Human Bondage* it is the most likely of his works to survive, for it is not only an expression of Maugham's own point of view, it is also representative of what many people in Maugham's generation believe. It is, truly, "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed". But it, too, is not the work of an imaginative mind; its philosophy is the philosophy of the present and the practical — it does not play with original concepts or mould any unity that does not already exist. For Maugham there are no eternal silences.

But if we are to exclude Maugham from the very top rank of contemporary writers, that does not mean that we can dismiss him entirely. His honesty, his craftsmanship, and his admirable gifts for arousing interest and holding attention make him the kind of writer whom it is always a pleasure, and sometimes a stimulus, to read. If literature is to flourish, there must always be, in any given generation, a number of writers who take their work seriously as a craft, who look with unfailing curiosity and interest at human behaviour, and who consider the description of that behaviour one of the chief justifications for living. Writers of this kind are essential both for keeping our sensitivities alive and for preserving that common basis of value and tradition which must always be the groundwork for writing of the superior kind. Among such writers Maugham holds a high place, and to deny him

our respect were to deny respect to the art he has served so long and so well.

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## W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM: THEME AND VARIATIONS

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Few contemporary authors have been praised as highly and condemned as completely as has W. Somerset Maugham. A recent critic enthusiastically says that today he is "perhaps the most creative talent in the field of the English novel". Another, while granting Maugham's talent, suggests that sinister influences have vitiated his abilities, a suggestion with which a great many competent readers, I think, would agree. "It is indisputable", he writes, "that Mr. Maugham, despite the authorship of one novel of almost universal appeal, ceased some time ago to be a force and was bought, as it were. . . . What metamorphosis took place? What happened? Were his desires worldly from the start; was he fired originally with no artist's longing to see and make, but with an earthling's lust to dine well and glitter? Or was a man of genius, a virgin heart, seduced by the great world of riches and power?"\*

Now I propose to attempt at least to suggest the reasons for, if not to reconcile, opinions as widely different as these and, at the same time, to offer a less impetuous and more carefully substantiated criticism of Maugham's fictional works. Fundamentally, I want to describe his basic ideas and their development and then to offer some comments concerning their value. I know that to approach his work from the point of view of its intellectual content rather than of its entertainment value is to violate his own request. But it is certainly an unreasonable request, and I am afraid that it is

\*This quotation is taken from Gerald Sykes' article "An Author in Evening Dress", reprinted on pp. 70-72.



a defensive one. In the case of any novelist, a discussion of the materials which he abstracts from life and of the point of view which he uses them to illustrate forms an important part of the criticism of his work. The man who wrote *Of Human Bondage*, a novel which traces the development of the philosophy of its leading character, can hope even less than most to escape such discussion.

Maugham's early fiction is little known; and this fact, I think, is responsible for a failure on the part of many of his readers to estimate properly his later artistic achievements.

The basic situations which were to become highly important in Maugham's work appeared initially in the second of his novels, *The Making of a Saint*, published in 1898. This book is an unsuccessful historical novel, which tells the story of an abortive revolution in a late-fifteenth-century Italian city-state. Naturally, however, a love story is woven into the plot, which otherwise concerns itself with politics; and it is the love story which contains the seeds of Maugham's future development. A young man named Filippo Brandolini (notice the early appearance of Philip Carey's Christian name) falls in love with a profligate widow named Giulia dall'Aste. Her profligacy is not obvious; she is beautiful and appears innocent and fragile. In the beginning Filippo accepts her at her face value and falls deeply in love with her. Presently he discovers what she is, but he cannot shake off his attachment.

This rather simple situation has three elements in it which deserve attention. In the first place, Giulia appears to be one thing and actually is something quite different; second, Filippo is tormented by a passion which he cannot conquer; and, third, knowledge of the true nature of his beloved does not free him from his enslavement. These three qualities of characters in *The Making of a Saint* may seem commonplace and insignificant; yet, their nakedness hidden by constantly altered disguises, they were destined to inspire a large part — the most important part — of the work of Somerset Maugham and eventually to form the foundation for one of the most

persuasive statements of a philosophy which has appeared in recent English fiction.

Their first change of wardrobe occurred in Maugham's next novel, *Mrs. Craddock*, finally published in 1902. Bertha Ley falls in love with Edward Craddock, a tenant on her estate, and marries him in spite of the objections of her friends. They are utterly unadapted to each other. Bertha is ardent, Edward cold. She is imaginative and rather intellectual; he is pedestrian, even stupid. But for years her perception of his true qualities does nothing to free her from her passion for him. Before the end, however, she falls in love with a young cousin of hers named Gerald Vaudrey. He is an innocent-looking young rake. In Maugham's words: "She was struck by the contrast between his innocent appearance and his shocking past". Basically, the peculiar problems which the characters confront are the same as those in the earlier book. Edward and Gerald together take the place of Giulia, and Bertha is the transformation of Filippo.

*The Merry-Go-Round*, published in 1904, derives its name from the fact that it is made up of several plots. In one of these a Mrs. Castillyon falls in love with a pleasant, good-looking scoundrel named Reginald Barlow-Bassett; knowledge of his actual character does not save her. In another, one Bella Langton, daughter of the Dean of Tercanbury, finds herself in love with a banker's clerk named Herbert Field, who is about twenty years her junior. Again knowledge of the unsuitability of the beloved offers no refuge from the tempest of passion. But, in this instance, as he was also to do later, Maugham suddenly and refreshingly reverses his situation. Giulia, Edward, and Gerald were all deceptive in that they looked satisfactorily and proved the opposite. Here Herbert Field appears to be the wrong man for Bella Langton and turns out to be quite all right. The marriage is a success, though Field presently dies. Yet another part of *The Merry-Go-Round* is an early experiment with a portion of the Mildred-Philip situation in *Of Human Bondage*,

though, as a matter of fact, not the first experiment with it. In 1898 Maugham had written a play, finally produced in 1903, which made use of the same characters, the same situations, and even some of the same speeches as he was to incorporate into this part of *The Merry-Go-Round*. The two versions of the story do not differ in any important particulars. Basil Kent, a young man of intelligence and education, falls in love with a barmaid named Jenny Bush. She jilts a previous suitor and accepts Basil's attentions, partly because she considers him such a perfect gentleman. Shortly afterward she becomes pregnant, and as a man of honour, Basil marries her. The child dies. They are themselves thoroughly incompatible, and their marriage ends with Jenny's suicide. The point of the play and of the narrative version of the story is that Basil, by attempting to live up to the demands of society after Jenny became pregnant, destroyed her. She wanted with all her heart to be a suitable wife to him and simply couldn't. It might have been better, thinks Maugham, if he had left her to bear the illegitimate child and to marry a man of her own class. But he makes his point by showing human beings again in the grasp of a passion from which at least one of them is powerless to escape.

These same situations, which were becoming Maugham's conventional reflections of human life, appear in *The Explorer*, published in 1907, though they are not very prominent there, and I shall not try the reader's patience by reciting a précis of the plot. I do wish, however, to glance briefly here at one more of these early novels, *The Magician*, which was published in the next year, 1908.

It is the merest potboiler, a melodramatic tale of magic; but, even so, it is important as showing the extent to which Maugham's conventional treatment of characters had by now come to control his mind. For even here he uses the same devices. Arthur Burdon, a brilliant young physician, is deeply in love with his ward, Margaret Dauncey. He offends a man named Oliver Haddo, a fellow who is repulsive in mind and

body but, as it turns out, a magician. Haddo secures revenge by practising his black arts on Margaret, who deserts her beloved Arthur and runs away with Haddo. She finds him utterly repellent, but his magic is too strong for her and she cannot break away, even when she knows he is plotting her death. It is clearly the same old story, except that this time the tie that binds the victims is magic, whereas previously it has been the character's own passions.

It may strike a reader as curious that, in sketching the situations which Maugham exploited in his early works, I have referred to but one out of a half-score of plays which he wrote before *Of Human Bondage*. The fact is, however, that most of them are practically devoid of serious content. Only one, *Loaves and Fishes*, which, though it was not produced until 1911, he wrote in 1902 and turned into a novel called *The Bishop's Apron* in 1906, deals with a theme which had sufficient importance in his eyes to cause him to use it several times. It is concerned with the venality of the clergy. The truth appears to be that when he wrote his plays, Maugham was always principally concerned with their audience-appeal and that the result of this concern was carefully constructed but easily grasped plots and witty, epigrammatic dialogue. A kind of shallow but mordant cynicism added sauce to his plays and doubtless gave him among theatre-goers a reputation for insight which a reading of the plays does not support. Later, during and after the World War, his dramatic work gained somewhat in weight. *Our Betters* (1915), *The Circle* (1921), and *The Sacred Flame* (1928), for instance, all present credible characters and deal with situations of more or less universal interest. But, in general, the plays are not as substantial as the novels because their subjects did not impinge significantly upon their author's most absorbing concerns with life and the most important judgments which he made about it.

I do not know why the situations which are repeated so often in Maugham's novels inspired his imagination. Perhaps

some important experiences in his own life led him to dwell on them. If such is the case, the events which animated him must have occurred very early, for they are reflected almost from the beginning of his career as a writer. Or perhaps he invented his formula. But in any event, as I have said, the formula contained important literary potentialities. On the surface, the dramatic possibilities inherent in the revelation of a character's actual qualities, when all the world has assumed him to be different from what he really is, are obvious — even to the authors of detective stories. And, similarly, the struggles of a person to extricate himself with his right hand from snares which his own left hand has set are bound to make compelling reading if handled with reasonable skill. But this is not all. There is in this situation which Maugham developed an implication — an implication concerning the very nature of the immediate motivation of all human actions. If a person rationally wills to choose one course of action but is compelled by some perhaps obscure part of his nature to follow another, then his rational will is not free. And if the person who struggles vainly against the promptings arising from the dark, mysterious, and unconscious depths of his own nature is a valid type of humanity, then humanity is not free to make rationally governed choices but is psychologically in bondage.

The notion that human beings are in such bondage is at least implicit in much of Maugham's early work. Bertha Craddock recognizes and deplors the fact that her love for Edward costs her much of her freedom. Mrs. Castillyon in *The Merry-Go-Round* protests that she is powerless to protect herself from the dissolute Reginald. But in both these books Maugham chooses to deal with the facts of conduct rather than with the implications to be drawn concerning its motivation. His characters are in bondage, but their servitude is not a condition which principally attracts the attention of the creator.

*The Hero*, published in 1901 though written after *Mrs.*

*Craddock*, is the early work of Maugham which comes closest to dealing directly with human freedom or, rather, the lack of it. For the first time, Maugham pays attention to the frustrating influences of environment as well as to those of an individual's irrational desires. A young British officer returning from service in the army finds that he does not love and cannot marry the girl who has waited patiently as his fiancée for five years. On the other hand, he is tormented by lust for the former wife of a brother officer. At first his old acquaintances receive him back with enthusiasm as a hero, but a little later they turn against him heartlessly when it becomes known that he cannot go through with the projected marriage. And he, for his part, seasoned by his years in the army, finds them stupid and dull. In the end he kills himself because he cannot have freedom of action. The book might have been a masterpiece if Maugham had stuck to the single theme of this young officer's tragic search for freedom. But Maugham is out to attack all sorts of conventional standards of morality and dissipates his energies in various channels. He pays off a stupid and superficial vicar and his wife in great style. He avers that lust, not chastity, is holy. He even has a good word to say for the doctrine that might makes right.

All in all, the book is a callow performance, but it is significant among Maugham's works for its implied determinism.

Nothing that Maugham had written up to 1912 gave him any substantial claim to fame. He had exploited the flashy possibilities of his conventional theme and at the same time had distorted himself by attacking the conventions of others. He had not been blind to the deeper implications of his theme, but he had never dealt with them adequately. In short, he had gone through a fifteen-year apprenticeship, which prepared him to write a masterpiece on a single subject.

In 1912, he sat down to write that masterpiece, *Of Human Bondage*. He says that he had tried to write the book back

in 1898; but it is fortunate that he failed and waited until he could bring along experience to bear upon its composition.

Anyone who has read it will, of course, recognize at once that it is basically a decking-out in new garb of the situations which he had used so often before. But in *Of Human Bondage* these situations grow far more complex and significant than they were when they originally appeared in *The Making of a Saint*. Maugham develops his formula in mature and genuinely imaginative fashion. Mildred Rogers is much more than a voluptuous siren who appears innocent. She is anæmic and not obviously a woman of much physical attraction, a fact which makes Philip's devotion to her the more striking. She is stupid and vulgar. To Philip she appears to have no sensuality. But this appearance is false, for men who chance to be as vulgar as she are able to arouse powerful passions within her. She is herself to some extent in bondage to her passions. Philip, however, is the character whose lack of freedom is most impressive. He loves Mildred, in spite of her repulsive vulgarity, for some reason too mysterious for him to comprehend. Like Filippo Brandolini, he understands perfectly the character of his beloved, but knowledge is no avail against the cravings of his soul. In Fanny Price, the unsuccessful artist whom Philip meets in Paris, Maugham creates a new kind of character, in bondage to a passion which I believe he had never described before, the passion to paint. Her desires are as irrational as Philip's, because she has no ability at all; but the evident fact that she cannot paint does nothing to slake her need for that kind of expression.

Considered as a whole, the book is great, I think, because Maugham for the first time brings into clear focus the deterministic implications of his formula and because he successfully projects his psychological determinism against the background of a mechanistic, naturalistic interpretation of life. The novel is thus principally concerned not with events but with a philosophy. Unlike *The Hero*, it is a thoroughly unified work. Each major episode, beginning with Philip

Carey's early discovery of the importance of his physical limitations, puts another bar across the windows of human freedom. Philip loses faith in the religion which preaches free will; he learns that his own intense desire to paint does not confer upon him the requisite ability; he loves Mildred; he feels the pinch of poverty; and he finally comes to see the development of life as the unfolding of a pattern which has no significance but which may by chance prove to be aesthetically pleasing.

Maugham not only sees clearly what he wants to say, but he says it cannily. As he attempts to argue the position of the determinist, he directs at Philip the inferences which he draws from various situations and seeks to convince the reader by first convincing his hero.

The fact that *Of Human Bondage* is, to a considerable extent, autobiographical is frequently mentioned by critics of his work and is, of course, indisputable, regardless of whether the Mildred episode has any basis in fact. But to consider it as fictionalized autobiography is to make it appear a much more immediate and direct reflection of experience than it is. Theodore Dreiser, for instance, in his excellent review of the book which appeared in *The New Republic*,\* seems to regard it as a kind of spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. It is, of course, nothing of the sort, as this discussion has shown. It is calculated and artificial; but the calculation which produced it was born of experience in writing and the artifice is the artifice which creates the illusion of reality.

*Of Human Bondage* was not at all a work of great promise. It was a fulfilment of a promise made fifteen years before. From the beginning Maugham had seen human beings in a certain way, and he had now achieved, I think, the most perfect expression of his insight of which he was capable. But, though the play was over, the curtain refused to come down. Maugham was a professional writer, and a professional writer must keep on writing. His attitudes, however,

\*Reprinted in this anthology on pp. 101-107.



did not change, except in one respect, which I shall mention presently, and he did not develop new, significant ramifications of his ideas to which he must give expression. For the constancy of his opinions we have not only the evidence of his fictional works but also that of his autobiographical *The Summing Up*, published in 1938. Comparing his views then with those which he held when he was a student in St. Thomas' Hospital in the 1890's, he explicitly says: "The experience of all the years that have followed has only confirmed the observations on human nature that I made, not deliberately, for I was too young, but unconsciously . . . in the wards of St. Thomas's . . . I have seen men since as I saw them then, and thus I have shown them".

And the result? He has constantly repeated himself and has written nothing since which approaches the quality of his great work. But the answer to the charge that he sold himself out is that, on the contrary, he wrote himself out. Let us glance at some of his post-war efforts. *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), his next novel, was apparently inspired by the life of Gauguin, but the result is pure Maugham. Strickland, the central character, is consumed by a passion to paint. He is a modification of Fanny Price and of another artist who appears in *Of Human Bondage*. Even the old formula of the unworthy beloved recognized as unworthy by the enslaved lover appears again in the Strickland-Blanche-Stroeve situation. *The Painted Veil* (1925) describes the powerlessness of a woman to love a worthy man or to resist her desires for an unworthy one. *Cakes and Ale* (1930) conforms less to pattern. Yet Rosie Driffield, the most striking character in the book, is interesting principally because of her surprising ability to be sexually promiscuous and at the same time remain a perfectly self-possessed, integrated character. The world expects one set of actions from her and gets another. In *The Narrow Corner* (1932), Maugham remains preoccupied with the contradictions which can exist within characters. The book discusses, among other matters, the qualities of Captain

Nichols, who is a thief, an all-round scoundrel, a more than competent sailor, and a potential hero; and of Louise Frith, a virtuous girl, a virgin, who gives herself almost instantly to a stranger. *Theatre* (1937) concerns the uncontrollable love of a great actress for an inconsequential young man many years her junior. *Christmas Holiday* (1939) presents a virtuous prostitute and describes her love for a kleptomaniac, homicidal husband. *Up at the Villa* (1940)\* and *The Hour before the Dawn* (1942) deal with the same old themes but, as books, are completely unimportant.

Maugham's latest book — this article was written before the publication of the inconsequential *Then and Now* — *The Razor's Edge* (1944), however, though built around the usual themes, presents the first significant modification of them which he has effected since he created Fanny Price and Charles Strickland. The overwhelming desire of Larry Darrell, the central character, is not to win love or paint, but to find God. Though the book is not a masterpiece, it does seem to offer evidence that Maugham writes about what he considers important. For Larry's most striking quality is his goodness; and in *The Summing Up* Maugham says that, though he once regarded the creation of beauty as the most suitable end of human action, he now considers the good more important than the beautiful.

Though Maugham published a collection of unimportant short stories called *Orientalisms* in 1899, the bulk of his extensive work in this form falls in the period of his life during which his novels were largely filled with repetitions of the themes to which he had given what should have been final expression in *Of Human Bondage*. It is, therefore, no surprise to find that his stories — or those of them which pretend to make any serious comment upon life — likewise reflect these themes.

For example, in *Rain* a missionary persecutes a prostitute

\*An interesting review of this novel by Morton Dauwen Zabel appeared in *The Nation* (May 3, 1941) under the title "A Cool Hand".

until suddenly a taste of forbidden fruit which no one suspected him of entertaining gets the better of him. *The Letter* is the story of a woman who for years had appeared invulnerable to passion, unusually self-controlled, almost serene, but who all the while had been devoted to a lover and who, when he deserted her, killed him. *The Round Dozen* concerns a celebrated bigamist who wins as his twelfth wife a very conservative spinster. *The Human Element* describes a beautiful, vivacious, and cultivated young Englishwoman, who, despite the fact that some of the most eligible men in England found her attractive, maintained from her girlhood an adulterous connection with her chauffeur. *The Vessel of Wrath* contains, roughly, a repetition of the circumstances of *Rain*, with a female missionary playing the role of the reformer.

On the whole, critics have not been too highly impressed by Maugham's short stories. The reason is perhaps inherent in the very themes which he uses. If he is to exhibit unexpected aspects of the conduct of human beings who are gnawed upon by some passion, the natural dénouement of his stories is the performance of a surprising act or the revelation of some shocking quality of the soul. The climax of *The Letter*, for instance, is the revelation that Leslie Crosbie's life has been adulterous almost from the beginning of her marriage. But it is one thing to introduce at the end of the story a surprising act which illuminates all that has gone before; it is quite another to introduce one which denies all that has gone before. In the latter case, it is likely not to be the interpretation of character but sheer surprise which most impresses the reader. And sheer surprise does not afford adequate intellectual stimulation; it merely represents a source of interest and excitement. This difficulty, it seems to me, is one from which Maugham can hardly escape in a short story. In a novel the surprising aspects of a character can be uncovered, discussed, illustrated, and their effects analyzed. The whole may be to illustrate a philosophical point of view.

The result may be a stimulating comment upon some aspect of life. But in a short story, long discussion and repeated illustration are impossible. If the *dénouement* is a surprising contradiction of the rest of the narrative, then more surprise is the principal result of reading the story. And I believe that Maugham's stories suffer from this overemphasis upon surprise to which he is driven and suffer from it, despite his thought-provoking attacks upon conventional judgments and despite the general truth to life of his characterizations.

As one attempts to formulate judgments concerning Maugham's work as a whole, one is struck above all by its limited range. It is restricted both in breadth and depth.

It is restricted in breadth. The basic problem which he raises is that of the motivation of human choices. His solution, sometimes presented more or less tentatively, is that of the determinist; men choose what they do because they must. This kind of answer, though important --- it denies free will --- leaves altogether too much unsaid. When Maugham finds the ultimate causes of human choices to lie in the nature of things, he is thinking of the causative aspects of whole, vague, interacting psychological and environmental complexes. He is never specific. Concerning profound causes of particular psychological states in his characters he has nothing to say. And these vague complexes which in a sense are ultimate causes find expression in his works only in a very narrow range of actions. As we have seen, he uses countless modifications of a set formula; and, until lately, he has applied that formula principally to certain kinds of sexual frustrations or to needs for creative expression in the arts. How much of the broad human scene is omitted is evident.

A result of this narrow limitation of the area to which he restricts the activities of his characters is that the effect of his very considerable versatility in character drawing is seriously vitiated. Mr. Richard A. Cordell, the author of one of the two book-length studies of Maugham in English, emphasizes the fact that Maugham has created a wide

variety of characters. He says, for instance, "The women of Somerset Maugham's novels are highly individualized. In the characterizations of Liza, Bertha Ley, Mildred, Blanche Stroeve, Kitty Fane, Rosie Driffeld, Louise Frith, and Julia Lambeth he does not repeat himself". But Mr. Cordell does not carry his discussion far enough. It is true that these women are separate individuals; they differ from one another in intelligence, in taste, in ability, in background, and in appearance. But such differences may have genuine literary significance only when they permit an author to illustrate various aspects of life; and Maugham uses all these characters to illustrate virtually the same aspect. The essential problem of these women is the same - to find some satisfactory solution to their sexual needs. Their resolutions have this in common: each gives herself to a lover who, for one reason or another, is unsuitable for her. If Cordell wished to emphasize the diversity of character of Maugham's women, he would have done well to include Fanny Price in the group. She is different from all the rest; in her Maugham escapes in part from the constricting influence of his formula and is successful in illustrating a new aspect of life. But there are very few of his important feminine characters of whom this can be said. The same kind of criticism, of course, can be made concerning his men.

Just as Maugham's important comments upon life are limited in area, they are limited in depth. I have said that even in his most serious moments he is not concerned with profound causes of the psychological states of his characters. I do not mean that he does not provide adequate motivation for particular acts. He does. But he neglects what lies behind the immediate motive.

It is characteristic of his work that the responses of his characters are always extreme, even perverse. Philip's love for Mildred, Blanche's love for Strickland, and Strickland's desire to paint, all go beyond any reason. It is difficult to believe that the nineteenth century would have accepted these

characters just as they are drawn. The twentieth century, I think, owes its willingness to believe in them to Sigmund Freud and his successors, who have directed attention to a wide variety of perverse responses and explained them by reference to the unconscious mind. Philip Carey, Charles Strickland, Rosie Driffield, and Robert Berger are all good Freudian characters, except that the Freudian explanation of their conduct is missing. Why does Philip Carey love Mildred? Critics frequently answer the question by vague references to an alleged feeling of inferiority caused by his club foot. I think, however, that M. Paul Dottin is much nearer the mark when he says that Philip hates himself and that his love for Mildred is an attempt at self-annihilation. But why should he hate himself? Or, for that matter, what is the specific evidence in *Of Human Bondage* that there is any relationship between his affection for Mildred and his club foot? The fact is that Philip's response to her is left unmotivated, as are the extreme reactions of all Maugham's characters.

In other words, when it comes to dealing with basic psychological states, Maugham does not interpret; he reports. He gives his readers no genuine insight into the fundamental — and consequently the most interesting and important reasons for his characters' conduct. This is not to say that Maugham is merely a reporter. But the interpretation of life which he offers is abstracted from unaccountable, or unaccounted-for, patterns of behaviour. His vision does not extend far beyond his formula.

Maugham has sometimes been spoken of as having been unusually successful in recording characteristic features of twentieth-century life — indeed, as having helped in some slight measure to create them. But, after one notices how repetitious he is and how restricted his serious interests have been, must not one conclude that he has failed to give himself sufficient scope to interpret much that is peculiar to our changing culture? Of the twentieth-century social or political

manifestations of materialism he says nothing; the problems posed by the anti-intellectual neo-romantics apparently do not interest him. His basic philosophy is the conventional one of the brash, mechanistic nineteenth-century naturalists. It seems to me that one has to mention the names of D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf, and John Dos Passos to realize how far Maugham is in spirit from authors who have given literary expression to crucial problems peculiar to the twentieth century. He has been described as a revolutionist. Actually he is a sheep in a wolf's clothing. It is almost fair to say that he has been revolutionary only in his opinions on the incidence and importance of adultery.

Much of what I have written in the latter part of this paper is likely to appear disparaging. And certainly I have not dealt with some excellent qualities which Maugham displays — an unusual directness and simplicity of utterance and an extraordinary ability to articulate the parts of a plot and build them up to a dramatic climax. He pleases his readers. He interests them and, I feel sure, arouses a sense that what he is saying is important. But these are all matters which have been discussed repeatedly by critics of Maugham's work, and, further, lie outside the area which I have been attempting to explore.

I have been principally concerned with isolating and describing the formula in terms of which Maugham has seen human life and with showing the influence which it has had upon his work. I think that to understand the development of his use of the formula is to understand a great deal about Maugham. His basic strength is shown by the remarkably persuasive and integrated expression of his formula which he achieved in *Of Human Bondage*. But his weakness was predicted by his long inability to bring it into satisfactory focus and is demonstrated by his subsequent incapacity to transcend it and enlarge his view of life. It is not primarily a facile willingness to meet the demands of the vulgar but rather an inability to expand the insights of his youth which

**SOMERSET MAUGHAM**

is responsible for the dissatisfaction which many intelligent readers feel with his work. He has never escaped the young man who studied medicine at St. Thomas' Hospital in the late nineteenth century.

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### III

## BOOK REVIEWS

### A.

## THE DRAMATIST

### A PLAYWRIGHT WHO STUMBLED INTO FAME

EATON, Walter Prichard. Author, college professor, critic. Born in Malden, Mass., 1878. Among his books are *The American Stage of Today*, 1908; *The Drama in English*,<sup>1908</sup> 1930; *Everybody's Garden*, 1932.

If you were but thirty-four years old and, suddenly, after nursing the play-writing bee in your bonnet since boyhood, found yourself getting fat royalties from three plays all at once, and some royalty from a fourth, while the managers who formerly turned you down now looked you up, perhaps you'd say foolish things to the interviewers, like W. Somerset Maugham. (The name is English, so you pronounce it any way you please, but please pronounce it "MAWM".) Indeed, only a supreme genius can survive an interview with dignity unimpaired. Perhaps it takes a still greater genius not to be interviewed at all. Maude Adams and Mrs. Fiske are never interviewed, which should help establish their fame.

Like Conan Doyle, Mr. Maugham began his literary career as a doctor. He attended to his first maternity case and his first novel at about the same time. His novel was called *Liza of Lambeth*, and was a study in slum life. He continued to turn out novels pretty steadily and to work at plays. One of his plays, a one-act piece, was produced in translation in Germany, and another, very serious, was put on at the Court Theatre, London, by the Stage Society in 1903. But, as he says himself, that only retarded him, for the managers who

"don't go in for Art" with a big A thought he must be a serious-drama sort of person. So he kept on knocking at their doors in vain for several years more. Presumably patients continued to knock on his. It is well to have a remunerative avocation if you aspire to be a dramatist.

At last he landed; as the saying goes, he landed with both feet. The most recent of his plays, *Lady Frederick*, was produced in London a year ago, with Miss Ethel Irving in the title part. Miss Ethel Barrymore will play the part here this fall. *Lady Frederick* is an Irish widow who disillusiones a boy lover by letting him see her in the process of putting on her beauty.

Just how Miss Barrymore is ever going to persuade us that she needs any aids for *her* beauty is a pretty problem. The smart epigrams of this play were soon town talk, and Mr. Maugham, the neglected, found himself suddenly besieged for more plays. He went down into his trunk, and up came *Jack Straw* for Charles Hawtrey, which John Drew is now playing in New York - playing very well, too. Then came *Mrs. Dot* for Marie Tempest, still more slight in dramatic texture, but made a success by Miss Tempest's personality. We shall not see it in America till she brings it to us herself. And finally, in June, 1908, while these three were all paying him fat royalties, up came a fourth, *The Explorer*, for Lewis Waller. That was more serious, and it failed. But when a man is getting at least \$1,000 a week for three other plays, he can still have a cab on rainy nights.

By this time Mr. Maugham began to be interviewed. He denied that he wrote hastily. One play a year is his pace, he says. (Our own Clyde Fitch has written four in that space!) "I don't know that I have ever considered the theoretical part of play-writing", he is quoted as saying. "A man can either write plays or he cannot. I must say there is a tremendous amount of nonsense talked about the serious drama. All that hifaluting chatter about ideals!"

Well, Mr. Maugham's plays — the successful ones — are

WALTER PRICHARD EATON

not very serious things, surely. But because a popgun can't be the crack of doom, there is no reason for its somewhat aggressively declaring that there is no crack of doom.

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## SOMERSET MAUGHAM HIMSELF

LEWISOHN, Ludwig. Author, critic, translator. Professor at Brandeis University, Mass. Born in Berlin, Germany, 1883. Dramatic editor, *The Nation*, 1919. Translated many works of Hauptmann, Wassermann, Werfel, and Rilke. Author: *The Drama and the Stage*, 1922; *The Case of Mr. Crump*, 1926; *Among the Nations*, 1948; *Goethe: The Story of a Man*, 1949; *The American Jew: Character and Destiny*, 1950.

For several centuries the drama has been the outcast of English literature. Men thought it good enough as a source of fortune but hardly as a source of fame. Its supposed technique kept them from using it in a vehicle of true expression; a mingled contempt and reverence for their audiences held in check their impulses toward veracity and power. The man who wrote *Tom Jones* threw off nearly a score of now forgotten comedies; the man who wrote *Of Human Bondage* is responsible for as many. But Fielding's action was the more natural. There was not in any vital sense an expressive drama in the England of his day. Nor could he have borrowed fruitfully from the tragedy of Voltaire or the comedy of Marivaux. Mr. Maugham has had the example of Shaw and Galsworthy and of the Germans among whom he passed his student years. Yet he has gone so far, in the past, as to write for the stage with a hard deliberateness from within the round of illusions he must himself despise. He sank as low as *Caesar's Wife*. Perhaps a late uneasiness assailed him. He heeded that warning and wrote *The Circle*.

He does not yet venture a tone that fits his subject and his fundamental mood. He lets the irony lighten and brighten and become farcical; he lingers and hesitates until one almost believes that he is at one with the trivial Pinero, who thought that Paula Tanqueray was really an object of tragic compassion because the ladies of the county would not come to tea. Late in the third act the cleaving truth appears. But even here

Mr. Maugham will not let it be quite sombre or else quite radiant. He swathes it a little with sentiment and muffles it a little with false memories. But it is out. For the first time in the drama his intellectual integrity is intact.

Two subjects seem to haunt the mind of the British playwright: the subject of the socially unequal marriage and the subject of the eloping couple who drag out hopeless lives because their particular social group will have none of them. And the tradition was that the first of these two actions should end happily, as in Robertson's *Caste*, and that the second should end wretchedly and vindicate the social solidarity of the British ruling class. Galsworthy's *The Eldest Son* shattered the first of these traditional solutions, Somerset Maugham's *The Circle* shatters the second.

At first the conventional tone seems to prevail. Lord Porteous and Lady Kitty, who ran away together thirty years ago, return. They quarrel and bicker. He gets tight after dinner because he had to give up his political career and could not go big game shooting with his equals. She is rouged and affected, old without peace or dignity or comfort, because during the thirty years in Italy she had no place or activity in society and had to consort with kept women and shady barons. The once abandoned husband circles about these two with an old bitterness sheathed in a bright, luxurious, goading irony. But the mere visible example of Porteous and Lady Kitty does not suffice to point the moral of their fate. Elizabeth, Lady Kitty's slim and fiery and romantic young daughter-in-law, is just about to bolt with a young man from the Malay Peninsula. Porteous and Lady Kitty do a brave and ghastly thing. They bare their history. Its boredom, its moral secdiness, its brief rapture, and its long regret. Elizabeth is frightened and subdued. But her young man makes a final plea. He does not offer her happiness but splendour and despair, not the peace of the world but the sword of the spirit. She goes with him. And as she goes, old Porteous rises to a moment of self-recognition that saves the play, crushes a

sentimental convention of the stage, and vindicates the mind and art of Somerset Maugham. He and Lady Kitty have failed not on account of what they did but on account of what they were. "We're trivial people, Kitty", he says sadly. It is the right and momentous word, the word that Pinero did not utter even by implication in regard to the Tanquerays. People who go to pieces morally and mentally simply because the members of one small social group cast them off, and who therefore herd with pinchbeck imitations of that group are trivial people. The world is wide and full of magnificent persons from all its ends who do not ask after the social register. They whom the social register can bend were never erect in any deeply human sense. It is character that creates the quality of action. Not what you do matters, but what your soul makes of the thing you do.

It will be seen, then, that with *The Circle* Somerset Maugham at last approaches the serious modern drama - the drama in which conflict and solution are transferred from the superficial compacts and modes of social life into that realm of the reason and of spiritual values in which those modes and compacts are themselves questionable and on trial. This is indeed the test of any play: whether it accepts the rules of the social or political or moral game as fixed and final or whether it goes to those sources of truth in the nature of man and of his world which these rules often slander and betray. The hardest thing to do, Maugham wrote in his great novel, is to "establish a contact with reality". It seems hardest of all through the medium of the drama. But in *The Circle* he has established that contact at last.

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## OUR BETTERS

CORDELL, Richard A. Professor of English Literature and author. Born in Bloomington, Ind., 1896. Since 1919 Member of the English Department at Purdue University. Reviewer with *Saturday Review of Literature* since 1938. Author: *Representative Modern Plays*, 1929; *Henry Arthur Jones and the Modern Drama*, 1932; *Twentieth Century Plays*, 1934, 1939, 1941; *William Somerset Maugham*, 1937; *Twentieth Century Plays, American*, 1947; *Twentieth Century Plays, British, American, Continental*, 1947.

Although busy with war work and the preparation of *Of Human Bondage* for the press, Somerset Maugham did not neglect play-writing. His easy activities in the Intelligence Department afforded him leisure time for writing; moreover his sojourn in Geneva aroused the suspicions of the police, and he was forced to practise his profession as a writer. He wrote *Our Betters* early in 1915 in Rome, and *Caroline* in the autumn of the same year in Geneva. Although *Our Betters* was written in 1915, it wisely was not produced until after the war — and even then the Lord Chamberlain required certain modifications. (Among other things, he banned the use of the word *slut*.) When the play was produced in 1923, the author was amused that critics, unaware that it had been written almost nine years before, pointed out with professional gravity various ways in which it showed development over earlier plays. *Our Betters*, perhaps the most brilliant artificial comedy of our age, was produced during the same season when the Phoenix Society and the Lyric (Hammersmith) were reviving Congreve. Only the most obtuse failed to see that *Our Betters* is directly in line with the glittering comedies of manners of the Restoration. If there had been a corrupt court after the war, and if the theatre had served to amuse only the *beau monde*, Somerset Maugham could have been its favourite playwright had

he so chosen; and he probably would not have chosen. The world of *Our Betters* is as far removed from most people's experience as is the world of *Love for Love*. It is the world of artificial high comedy. The author of *Our Betters* shows himself as witty as Congreve; and although Congreve is much praised for his style, his flowing periods would be as intolerable in modern comedy as would a plot so nearly undecipherable as that of *The Way of the World*. Somerset Maugham with *Our Betters* takes a place in the very front rank of writers of comedies of manners.

*Our Betters* was first performed in New York, where it created a minor sensation. It was produced in London at the Globe Theatre on September 11, 1923, and ran for more than a year. Its first run (578 performances) exceeded that of any other of the author's plays. Its excellent cast included Constance Collier, Marion Terry, and Reginald Owen. The satire and cynicism of the play, suggested by the title, suited the post-war mood of disillusion; its hard, merciless wit and its absolute freedom from sentimentality pleased a new generation who felt themselves duped and cheated by their emotions. James Agate has suggested that *Our Betters* was a curse as well as a blessing, for it started an avalanche of lubricious plays by imitators who shared Mr. Maugham's brilliance but not his mentality. The most celebrated of these imitators (a blunt word which their admirers will resent) were Noel Coward, Frederick Lonsdale, and Michael Arlen, much of whose worst work concerns itself with the flippancies and dull amours of decadents and degenerates.

There are characters in *Our Betters* who are decadent and some who are perilously close to degenerate; but at no time does the play pretend to picture anything more than a tiny fragment of 'society'. There is no pretence that these people matter. Mr. Maugham merely puts under the microscope a group of American expatriates, people of wealth and a variety of hard brilliance and unmorality who have not escaped the danger of degeneracy which threatened the idle rich in an



alien society. The author is not offended but amused by their cynicism, lack of conscience, opportunism, and well-mannered dissoluteness. As a result the playgoer or reader is likewise not deeply shocked, for he is led to observe the heartless, cynical heroine, the ridiculous, fatuous Duchess, the despicable spongers and loafers, not with revulsion but with a pleasant horror. If an immoral play is one that makes vice attractive, then *Our Betters* takes precedence over *Everyman* as a moral play. The author maintains a remorseless detachment throughout, which by no means indicates a callous lack of sympathy or understanding, but which gives an anti-septic cleanliness to the comedy. *Camille*, *Mid-Channel*, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, *Declassée*, in spite of tragic endings, are sodden with bathos and imply an indulgence with wrongdoing that makes them more immoral than *Our Betters*. Although the straight-laced affected to be shocked by it, *Our Betters* is as relentlessly moral as *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. The two decent young Americans, who are minor characters, do not dull the hard polish of the comedy. The characters and situation offer numerous possibilities for tragedy or sentiment, but the play does not swerve from its comic course. It ends on a note of laughter not muffled by repentance or censure.

The fact that there are few quotable epigrams indicates the improvement in the dramatist's comic dialogue. The repartee is more brilliant than ever, but it fits the characters and situation and dims when removed from its content. When Clay, the snobbish opportunist, remarks, "Poor Flora, with her good works! She takes to philanthropy as a drug to allay the pangs of unrequited love!" we must know both Clay and Flora to appreciate the humour. When the Princess asks, "Has it ever occurred to you that snobbishness is the spirit of romance in a reach-me-down?" we feel that years of her own experience prompt the question; it is not merely a *bon mot* transferred from the playwright's notebook. For purposes of dramatic contrast, and not from any didactic motive, the

cynical humour pauses occasionally for the commonsense comments of the two young Americans and Lord Bleane, who serve as an unobtrusive chorus. They do not seriously touch the comedy. *Our Betters* is cynical, satirical, and hard, but diverting and funny. The artificial comedy has gone in and out of fashion in the past and will go in and out of fashion in the future; but *Our Betters* will take its place as the finest example of the type in early twentieth century drama.

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## THE CONSTANT WIFE

CORDELL, Richard A.

**I**n April of 1927 Somerset Maugham gave to the stage another of his sparkling comedies of manner, *The Constant Wife*. In spite of a cast containing such favourites as Mary Jerrold, Maida Vanne, Paul Cavanagh, Leon Quartermaine, Heather Thatcher, and Fay Compton, the play failed in London. The reviews were almost ferocious: 'banal', 'tedious', 'devoid of wit', 'straw figures', 'trite', 'dismal', were the critics' verdicts. The play was a great success in America. Somerset Maugham journeyed to Cleveland for the American opening. Ethel Barrymore did not know her lines and improvised, confusing and exasperating other members of the cast. After the last curtain call she rushed up to the author, magnificently contrite. "O, Willie", she cried, "I have ruined your play! It will run a year!" It did run a year, and was successfully revived by Miss Barrymore in 1935. The author says of its failure in London: "It was a great success in America, in the foreign countries where it has been produced, and even in the provincial towns in England . . . where it has been successful it has been much praised by the critics. Not, of course, because they have been influenced by its success, but because a play consists of the words, the production, and the audience; and the failure of one of the parties concerned may make the difference between a good play and a bad one".

*The Constant Wife* is an almost perfect example of artificial comedy. It is smooth and witty, and completely without emotion; consequently one can no more be shocked by it than by Wycherley's heartless plays. The seriousness is as artificial as the gaiety; even the theme is fictitious — the notion that a wife owes fidelity to her husband only as long as she is his dependent economically. Artifice is as much a convention of this type of comedy as blank verse is to the Elizabethan

tragedy. *The Constant Wife* borrows liberally from the plot of *Penelope*: Constance discovers that her husband, a physician, is having an affair with her best friend. She feigns ignorance of the situation as long as possible, goes into business, secures economical independence, and then announces that she no longer feels duty bound to be faithful to her husband — now temporarily cured of his philandering. Since we care nothing for the characters, clever repartee and bold and ingenious vindication of unorthodox attitudes and conduct substitute for emotional appeal. There is also plot interest, for we wonder what will happen to the characters although their complete extermination would leave us untouched. If the artificial comedy never comes into fashion again, *The Constant Wife* and *Our Betters* will serve as classic examples of the obsolete form.

Because of the absence of sentiment in the play, the epigrams, practically all unpleasant or cynical, amuse but do not pain. "Frankness of course is the pose of the moment. It is often a very effective screen for one's thoughts". "Truth is an excellent thing, but before one tells it one should be quite sure that one does so for the advantage of the person who hears it, rather than for one's own self-satisfaction". "We ascribe a great deal of merit to ourselves because we're faithful to our husbands, I don't believe we deserve it for a minute. We're naturally unfaithful creatures and we're faithful because we have no particular inclination to be anything else". "It's not the seven deadly virtues that make a good husband, but the three hundred pleasing amiabilities". "It's only if a man's a gentleman that he won't hesitate to do an ungentlemanly thing". "Men only abandon their vices when advancing years have made them a burden rather than a pleasure". "When the average woman who has been married fifteen years discovers her husband's infidelity, it is not her heart that is wounded but her vanity". This humour is extrinsic, superficial. *The Constant Wife* is *Lady Windermere's Fan* rewritten for a new generation; the melodrama is

missing and an audacious ending is substituted for the sentimental reconciliation in the earlier play. Each ending fits the taste of its time, but both are equally incredible. *The Constant Wife* was the last play by Somerset Maugham to betray the influence of Oscar Wilde.

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## B.

### THE NOVELIST AS A REALIST SEES IT

#### *Of Human Bondage*

DREISER, Theodore. Author and journalist. Born in Terre Haute, Ind., 1871. Author: *Sister Carrie*, 1900; *Jennie Gerhardt*, 1911; *The Financier*, 1912; *The Titan*, 1914; *Twelve Men*, 1919; *An American Tragedy*, 1925; *Dreiser Looks at Russia*, 1928; *America is Worth Saving*, 1941. Died 1945.

Sometimes in retrospect of a great book the mind falters, confused by the multitude and yet the harmony of the detail, the strangeness of the frettings, the brooding, musing, intelligence that has foreseen, loved, created, elaborated, perfected, until, in this middle ground, which we call life, somewhere between nothing and nothing, hangs the perfect thing which we love and cannot understand, but which we are compelled to confess a work of art. It is at once something and nothing, a dream, a happy memory, a song, a benediction. In viewing it, one finds nothing to criticize or to regret. The thing sings, it has colour. It has rapture. You wonder at the loving, patient care which has evolved it.

Only recently I finished reading Mr. W. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. It was with some such feeling as this that I laid it down. In recent years, and quite definitely, we have been getting on in a literary way. Despite our complaints as to the intolerance of a philistine age, many interesting things are being done. In England, particularly in the last few years (though France has produced *Jean Christophe*), we have had George Moore, all of him; *The New Machiavelli* of Wells, *Fortitude* by Hugh Walpole; *The Old Wives' Tale* by Arnold Bennett, *Sinister Street* by Compton

Mackenzie, *The New Grub Street* by Gissing, *Joseph Stahl* by J. D. Beresford, and also such minor volumes as *The Rat Pit* by Patrick MacGill, and *Mushroom Town* by Oliver Onions. (What a name!)

In America, on the other hand, we have lagged. There have been *Predestined* by Stephen French Whitman, *Quick-sand* by Hervey White, *The Story of Eva* by Will Payne, *The Turn of the Balance* by Brand Whitlock, *With the Procession* by H. B. Fuller, and *McTeague* by Frank Norris, but all of these, transcendent as are their narrative merits, are lacking somehow in the vast undercurrent of which these newer and more forceful writers seems cognizant.

Here is a novel or biography or autobiography or social transcript of the utmost importance. To begin with, it is unmoral, as a novel of this kind must necessarily be. The hero is born with a club foot, and in consequence, and because of a temperament delicately attuned to the miseries of life, suffers all the pains, recessions, and involute self tortures which only those who have striven handicapped by what they have considered a blighting defect can understand. He is a youth, therefore, with an intense craving for sympathy and understanding. He must have it. The thought of his lack and the part which his disability plays in it soon becomes an obsession. He is tortured, miserable.

In pursuit of his ideal from his earliest youth he clings to both men and women in a pathetic way, a truly moving spectacle. The story begins at the home of his mother in or near London. She is dying, and among the last things she does is to feel the deformed foot of her son, with what thoughts we may well imagine. Later, in the home of his uncle, William Carey, vicar of Blackstable in Kent, we find him suffering for want of sympathy and concealing his shyness and desire behind a veil of assumed indifference. By Carey and his wife he is fostered in a somewhat stern way until his schooldays at Tercanbury begin. There he is tortured by unfeeling playmates, unconscious of the agony which

his deformity causes him, until he is ready to leave for a higher school, and presumably prepare himself for the ministry.

Study, in an innate opposition to the life, decides him to leave and go to Heidelberg, Germany, where apparently he remains for a year and rids himself of all his early religious beliefs. A little later he returns to England uncertain as to his career, and enters the office of a chartered accountant in London, for which privilege he pays. If anyone has ever given a better description of English clerkly life I am not aware of it. After a year he gives this up, finding himself unsuited to it, and essays art, the suggestions and the enthusiasms of certain friends impelling him to it. Two years of the Latin Quarter, Paris, and the fierce discussions which rage around the newer movements in art make it clear to him that he is unsuited for that field, and with a sense of defeat he gives it up. A few months later he enters a medical school in London with a view of becoming a physician. It is here that his loneliness and his passion for sympathy drive him into a weird relationship with a waitress in an ABC restaurant in London, which eventually eats up the remainder of his small fortune of twelve hundred pounds. Finally, penniless and destitute, sleeping on park benches for days, he is compelled to enter a London shop as a clerk at six shillings a week 'and found'. Those who place so much faith in the intellectual supremacy of the English and their right to lead the world on to Elysian fields of perfection might study the picture which he gives of underworld clerk life with profit. There is no more degrading form of wage slavery practised by any nation, civilized or uncivilized.

Two years of this and then the vicar of Blackstable dies, leaving him a competence of six hundred pounds, wherewith he is able to restore himself to his medical studies. In four years more he has acquired his diploma, and is now ready to become a general practitioner. Curiously, the story rises to no spired climax. To some it has apparently appealed as a



drab, unrelieved narrative. To me at least it is a gorgeous weave, as interesting and valuable at the beginning as at the end. There is material in its three hundred thousand and more words for many novels and, indeed, several philosophies, and even a religion or stoic hope. There are a series of women, of course — drab, pathetic, enticing, as the case may be — who lead him through the mazes of sentiment, sex, love, pity, passion, a wonderful series of portraits and of incidents. There are a series of men friends of a peculiarly inclusive range of intellectuality and taste, who lead him, or whom he leads, through all the intricacies of art, philosophy, criticism, humour. And lastly comes life itself, the great land and sea of people, England, Germany, France, battering, corroding, illuminating, a Goyaesque world.

Naturally I asked myself how such a book would be received in America, in England. In the latter country, I was sure, with its traditions of the *Athenæum* and the *Saturday Review*, it would be adequately appreciated. Imagine my surprise to find that the English reviews were almost uniformly contemptuous and critical on moral and social grounds. The hero was a weakling, not for a moment to be tolerated by sound, right-thinking men. On the other hand, in America the reviewers for the most part have seen its true merits and stated them. Need I say, however, that the *New York World* finds it "the sentimental servitude of a poor fool"; or that the *Philadelphia Press* sees fit to dub it "futile Philip", or that the *Outlook* feels that "the author might have made his book true without making it so frequently distasteful"; or that the *Dial* cries, "a most depressing impression of the futility of life"? "No brilliancy of style", mourns the *Detroit Times*. "Young folks are warned off", urges the *Portland Oregonian*. (As if that young person could be induced to examine so profound and philosophic a book!) "Certainly the story cannot be said to be in any sense a wholesome one, and it would require a distinctly morbid taste for one to enjoy it thoroughly". (Note the "thoroughly".) This from the *New*

• Orleans *Time-Picayune*. "One longs after reading these novels where spineless men and women yield without a struggle to the forces of evil"—but I cannot go on. It is too trite. You must judge for yourself how the reviewer on the *Saturday Evening Post* of Burlington, Ia., felt about it.

Despite these dissonant voices, it is still a book of the utmost import, and has so been received. Compact of the experiences, the dreams, the hopes, the fears, the disillusionments, the ruptures, and the philosophisings of a strangely starved soul, it is a beacon light by which the wanderer may be guided. Nothing is left out; the author writes as though it were a labour of love. It bears the imprint of an eager, almost consuming desire to say truly what is in his heart.

Personally I found myself aching with pain when, yearning for sympathy, Philip begs the wretched Mildred, never his mistress but on his level, to no more than tolerate him. He finally humiliates himself to the extent of exclaiming: "You don't know what it means to be a cripple!" The pathos of it plumbs the depths. The death of Fannie Price, of the sixteen-year-old mother in the slum, of Cronshaw, and the rambling agonies of old Ducroz and of Philip himself, are perfect in their appeal.

There are many other and all equally brilliant pictures. No one short of a genius could rout the philosophers from their lairs and label them as individuals "tempering life with rules agreeable to themselves", or could follow Mildred Rogers, waitress of the London ABC restaurant, through all the shabby windings of her tawdry soul. No other than a genius endowed with an immense capacity for understanding and pity could have sympathized with Fanny Price, with her futile and self-destructive art dreams; or old Cronshaw, the wastrel of poetry and philosophy; or Mons. Ducroz, the worn-out revolutionary; or Thorne Athelney, the caged grandee of Spain; or Leonard Upjohn, airy master of the art of self-advancement; or Dr. South, the vicar of Blackstable, and his wife — these are masterpieces. They are marvellous

portraits; they are as smooth as a Vermeer, as definite as a Hals, as brooding and moving as a Rembrandt. The study of Carey himself, while one sees him more as a medium through which the others express themselves, still registers photographically at times. He is by no means a brooding voice but a definite, active, vigorous character.

If the book can be said to have a fault, it will lie for some in its length, 300,000 words, or for others in the peculiar reticence with which the last love affair in the story is handled. Until the coming of Sallie Athelny all has been described with the utmost frankness. No situation, however crude or embarrassing, has been shirked. In the matter of the process by which he arrived at the intimacy which resulted in her becoming pregnant not a word is said. All at once, by a slight frown, which she subsequently explains, the truth is forced upon you that there has been a series of intimacies which have not been accounted for. After Mildred Rogers and his relationship with Norah Nesbit, it strikes one as strange.

I feel about this book, as I look back on it now, much as old Cronshaw in the story felt about the rug which was to clarify for Carey the meaning of life:

"As the weaver elaborated his pattern for no end but the pleasure of his æsthetic sense, so might a man live his life, or, if he was forced to believe that his actions were outside his choosing, so might a man look at his life, that it made a pattern. There was little need to do this or there was little need to do that. It was merely something that he did for his own pleasure. Out of the manifold events of his life, his deeds, his feelings, his thoughts, he might make a design, regular, elaborated, complicated or beautiful; and though it might be no more than an illusion that he had the power of selection, that did not matter; it seemed and so to him it was. In the vast warp of life, with the background to his fancies that there was no meaning and that nothing was important, a man might get a personal satis-

faction in selecting the various strands that worked out the pattern. . . . What happened to him now would be one more motive to add to the complexity of the pattern, and when the end approached he would rejoice in its completion. It would be a work of art and it would be none the less beautiful because he alone knew of its existence, and with his death it would at once cease to be”.

And so it is, Mr. Maugham, this life of Philip Carey as you have woven it. One feels as though one were sitting before a splendid Shiraz or Daghestan of priceless texture and intricate weave, admiring, feeling, responding sensually to its colours and tones. Or better yet, it is as though a symphony of great beauty by a master, Strauss and Beethoven, has just been completed, and the bud notes and flower tones were filling the air with their elusive message, fluttering and dying. Mr. Maugham, as I understand it, has written eleven conventional books and as many plays. It may be that for years, as the paragraph quoted suggests, he has lived willing that the large knowledge which this book reveals should remain unseen and even perish with him. For all of that he is none the less a great artist. Vicariously, it seems to me, he has suffered for the joy of the many who are to read after him. By no willing of his own he has been compelled to take life by the hand and go down where there has been little save sorrow and degradation. The cup of gall and wormwood has obviously been lifted to his lips and to the last drop he has been compelled to drink it. Because of this we are enabled to see the rug, woven of the tortures and the delights of a life. We may actually walk and talk with one whose hands and feet have been pierced with nails.

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OF HUMAN BONDAGE  
WITH A DIGRESSION ON THE ART OF FICTION

AN ADDRESS BY W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

April 20, 1946

*Ladies and Gentlemen:*

You will remember that one of the characters in Dostoevsky's novel *The Possessed* remarks that at a literary gathering, such as this, no one should be allowed to discourse for more than twenty minutes. It is true that he is the most odious character in the book, but there is a lot in what he says. I shall try not to exceed this limit. I start by telling you this in case these typescript sheets I have in front of me fill you with misgiving. A year or two ago I was invited to give a lecture at a great and ancient university, and for reasons with which I need not trouble you I chose the somewhat grim topic of political obligation. I knew exactly what I wanted to say and went into the lecture hall without even a note. It was crowded to the doors. I think I got through the lecture pretty well and I reached my peroration without mishap. But having been at one time of my life a dramatist, I have been inclined to end a discourse with a curtain line. Well, I reached my curtain line with a sigh of relief and began very confidently: 'The price of liberty is—— and then I had a complete black-out and I could not for the life of me remember what the price of liberty was.

It brought my lecture to a humiliating conclusion and, unless in the interval someone else has told them, the students of that great and ancient university do not to this day know what the price of liberty is.

I thought I would not let myself be caught in that way again and I am no longer prepared to trust in the failing memory of the very old party you know I am.

I am very grateful to you for coming here tonight, since

you are not only paying me a compliment, but you are paying a compliment to a form of fiction which is badly in need just now of encouragement.

I have never pretended to be anything but a story teller. It has amused me to tell stories and I have told a great many. But as you know, story telling just for the sake of the story is not an activity that is in favour with the intelligentsia. It is looked upon as a debased form of art. That seems strange to me since the desire to listen to stories appears to be as deeply rooted in the human animal as the sense of property. Since the beginning of history men have gathered round the camp fire or in a group in the market place to listen to the telling of a story. That the desire is as strong as ever it was is shown by the amazing popularity of detective stories in our own day. For the habitual reader of them can generally guess who the murderer is before he is half way through, and if he reads on to the end it is only because he wants to know what happens next, which means that he is interested in the story.

But we novelists are on the whole a modest lot, and when we are told that it is our business, not merely to entertain, but to deal with social security, economics, the race question, and the state of the world generally, we are pleased and flattered. It is very nice to think that we can instruct our fellow men and by our wisdom improve their lot. It gives us a sense of responsibility and indeed puts us on a level of respectability with bank presidents. For my part, I think it is an abuse to use the novel as a pulpit or a platform, and I think readers are misguided when they suppose they can thus acquire knowledge without trouble.

It is a great nuisance that knowledge cannot be acquired without trouble. It can only be acquired by hard work. It would be fine if we could swallow the powder of profitable information made palatable by the jam of fiction. But the truth is that, so made palatable, we can't be sure that the powder will be profitable. I suggest to you that the knowledge the novelist imparts is biased and thus unreliable, and

it is better not to know a thing at all than to know it in a distorted fashion. If readers wish to inform themselves of the pressing problems of the day, they will do better to read, not novels but the books that specifically deal with them.

The novelist is a natural propagandist. He can't help it, however hard he tries. He loads his dice. By the mere fact of introducing a character to your notice early in his novel he enlists your interest and sympathy in that character. He takes sides. He arranges facts to suit his purpose. Well, that is not the way a book of scientific or informative value is written. There is no reason why a novelist should be anything but a novelist. He should know a little about a great many things, but it is unnecessary, and sometimes even harmful, for him to be a specialist in any particular subject. The novelist need not eat a whole sheep to know what mutton tastes like; it is enough if he eats a chop. Applying then his imagination and his creative faculty to the chop he has eaten, he can give you a very good idea of an Irish stew, but when he goes on from this to give you his views on sheep raising, the wool industry and the political situation in Australia, I think it is well to accept his ideas with reserve.

But please do not misunderstand me. There can be no reason why the novelist should not deal with every subject under the sun so long as it enables him to get on with his story and to develop his characters. If I insist on the importance of the story, it is partly because it is a very useful rail for the author to cling to as page follows page and it is the surest way for him to hold his reader's interest. The story and the persons of the story are interdependent. They must act according to character or the story will lose its plausibility, but it seems to me that the author is at liberty to choose his characters to fit his story or to devise his story to fit his characters. Which he does, probably depends on the idiosyncrasy of his talent, if any.

I suggest to you that it is enough for a novelist to be a good novelist. It is unnecessary for him to be a prophet, a

preacher, a politician or a leader of thought. Fiction is an art and the purpose of art is to please. If in my quarters this is not acknowledged I can only suppose it is because of the unfortunate impression so widely held that there is something shameful in pleasure. But all pleasure is good. Only, some pleasures have mischievous consequences and it is better to eschew them. And of course there are intelligent pleasures and unintelligent pleasures. I venture to put the reading of a good novel amongst the most intelligent pleasures that man can enjoy.

And I should like to remind you in passing that reading should be enjoyable. I read some time ago a work by a learned professor which purported to teach his students how to read a book. He told them all sorts of elaborate ways to do this, but he forbore to mention that there could be any enjoyment to be got out of reading the books he recommended. In fact he made what should be a delight into an irksome chore, and, I should have thought, effectively eradicated from those young minds any desire ever again to open a book after they were once freed from academic bondage.

Let us consider for a moment the qualities that a good novel should have. It should have a coherent and plausible story, a variety of probable incidents, characters that are living and freshly observed, and natural dialogue. It should be written in a style suitable to the subject. If the novelist can do that I think he has done all that should be asked of him. I think he is wise not to concern himself too greatly with current affairs, for if he does his novel will lose its point as soon as they are no longer current. H. G. Wells once gave me an edition of his complete works and one day when he was staying with me he ran his fingers along the many volumes and said to me: "You know, they're dead. They dealt with matters of topical interest and now of course they're unreadable". I don't think he was quite right. If some of his novels can no longer be read with interest it is because he was always more concerned with the type than



with the individual, with the general rather than with the particular.

Nor do I think the novelist is wise to swallow wholesale the fashionable fads of the moment. I read an article the other day in which the author stated that in future no novel could be written except on Freudian principles. It seemed to me a very ingenuous statement. Most psychologists, though acknowledging liberally the value of Freud's contributions to their science, are of opinion that he put many of his theories in an exaggerated form; but it is just these exaggerations that attract the novelist because they are striking and picturesque. The psychology of the future will doubtless discard them and then the novelist who has based his work on them will be up a gum tree. How dangerous to the novelist the practice is, of depending too much on theories that a later generation may discard, is shown very well in the most impressive novel this century has produced, *Remembrance of Things Past*. Proust, as we know, was greatly influenced by the philosophy of Henri Bergson and large stretches of his great work are taken up with it. I think I am right in saying that philosophers now regard Henri Bergson's more striking ideas as erroneous. I suppose we all read with a thrill of excitement Proust's volumes as they came out, but now when we re-read them in a calmer mood I think what we find to admire in them is his wonderful humour and the extraordinarily vivid and interesting characters that he created. We skip his philosophical disquisitions.

It is obviously to the novelist's advantage that he should be a person of broad culture, but the benefit to him of that is the enrichment of his own personality. His business is with human nature and he can best acquire knowledge of that by observation and by exposing himself to all the vicissitudes of human life.

But I have not really come here to give you a discourse upon the art of fiction. Dr. Luther Evans asked me to talk to you about *Of Human Bondage*, and if I had so long delayed

to do so it is because I have now to tell you that I know very little about it. I corrected the proofs in the autumn of 1914 — thirty-two years ago — in a billet near Ypres by the light of a single candle, and since then I have only opened the book once. That was when, some months ago, I was asked to read the first chapter for a record that was being made for the blind. I did not make a very good job of it because I was moved, not because the chapter was particularly moving, but because it recalled a pain that the passage of more than sixty years has not dispelled. So if you will have patience with me I will content myself with giving you the history of this book.

While still a medical student I had published a novel which had some success and as soon as I had taken my degrees I went to Seville and settled down to write an autobiographical novel. I was then twenty-three. Following the fashion of the day I called it rather grandly *The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carcy*. Then I took it back to London to get it published. Life was cheap in those days, but even then you couldn't live for nothing, and I wanted a hundred pounds for my year's keep. But I could find no publisher who was willing to give me more than fifty. I dare say that was all it was worth, but that I obstinately refused to accept. It was a bit of luck for me, for if the book had been published then — and it was certainly very crude and very immature — I should have lost much that I was able to make better use of later.

Years went by and I became a popular dramatist. But those memories of an unhappy past burdened me and the time came when I felt that I could only rid myself of them by writing them; so I retired from the theatre and spent two years writing the book you know now. Then I had another bit of luck. I had called it *Beauty for Ashes*, which is a quotation from Isaiah, but discovered that a novel with that title had recently been published. I hunted about for another and then it occurred to me that the title Spinoza had given

to one of the books of his *Ethics* would very well do for mine. So I called it *Of Human Bondage*.

It was published in England in 1915 and was well enough reviewed. But we were then engaged in a war and people had more important things to occupy themselves with than the characters of a work of fiction. There had been besides a spate of semi-biographical novels and the public was a trifle tired of them. My book was not a failure, nor was it a success. It did not set the Thames on fire. It was only by a lucky break that it was published in America. George Doran, then a publisher who specialized in English books, brought it back to this country for consideration, but it was very long and nobody read it. Then Mrs. Doran got an attack of influenza and on asking for something to pass the time, George Doran gave her *Of Human Bondage* to read, chiefly, I believe, because of its length. She liked it and on this he decided to publish it.

It came out and Theodore Dreiser gave it in *The Nation*\* a very long, intelligent and favourable review. Other reviewers were more moderate in their praise, but on the whole sympathetic. The average life of a novel at that period was ninety days, and about that time *Of Human Bondage* appeared to die. For two or three years, perhaps more, it was to all appearance forgotten. Then again I had a bit of luck. For a reason I have never known it attracted the attention of various writers who were then well-known columnists, Alec Woolcott, Heywood Broun and the still living and still scintillating F. P. Adams. They talked about it among themselves and then began talking about it in their columns. It found new readers. It found more and more readers. The final result you know. It has now gained the doubtful honour of being required reading in many educational institutions. If I call it a doubtful honour it is because I am not sure that you can read with pleasure a book you have to read as a task.

\*This article actually appeared in *The New Republic* of December 25, 1915.

For my own part, I once had to read *The Cloister and the Hearth* in that way and there are few books for which I have a more hearty dislike.

It is because the success of *Of Human Bondage* is due to my fellow writers in America and to a whole generation of American readers that I thought the least I could do was to offer the manuscript to the Library of Congress.

When I asked Dr. Luther Evans if he would accept it I told him that I wanted to present it in gratitude for the hospitality I, my daughter and grandchildren have received in this country. I was afraid it would seem presumptuous if I said more. I did not expect this celebration. I thought that if Dr. Evans was agreeable to my suggestion, I would make the manuscript into a neat parcel, despatch it by parcel post, and then he would put it on one of the shelves in the Library and that would be that. But since you have been so good as to come here, since I have had a signal honour conferred on me, I am encouraged to say what was really my wish to say at the beginning. You know, we British are on the whole honest people, we like to pay our way and we do not like to be in debt. But there is one debt that we can never hope to repay, and that is the debt we owe you for the kindness and the generosity with which you received the women and children of my country when in fear of a German invasion they came to America. They were lonely and homesick and they were unhappy at leaving behind them those who were dear to them. No one knows better than I how much you did for them, how patient you were with them and what sacrifices you made for them. So it is not only for my own small family, but for all those of my fellow countrymen who found refuge on these shores that I wish to offer this manuscript to you, not as an adequate return, not even as a token payment, but just as an acknowledgment of the debt we owe you. Thank you.

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## IN VISHNU-LAND WHAT AVATAR?

### THE MOON AND SIXPENCE

ANDERSON, Maxwell. Author and playwright. Born in Atlantic, Pa., 1888. Among his numerous plays are *Both Your Houses* (Pulitzer Prize, 1933); *Winterset* (1935); and *High Tor* (1936). Both won the Critics' Prize.

The title of *The Moon and Sixpence* is an admission and therefore a defence — an admission by Somerset Maugham that explaining genius is as impossible as expressing moonlight in terms of the decimal system, and a defence of his method against such critics as will assuredly accuse him of failing in a task he never attempted. He has no illusions about cutting his green cheese to a super-mundane thinness. He gives us, flatly and baldly, the external aspect of the evolution of genius, not bothered in the least by the fact that what happens in his narrative is neither applicable nor probable. He merely sees to it that it happens and that we are convinced. His task was to present an extraordinary phenomenon as it appeared to the ordinary folk of the social vicinity in which it occurred. It is his theory that this is what we can understand, and truly this is what most concerns us. When a whirlwind sweeps the dozing harbour, we take no interest in the scientific explanations of the weather bureau, but pick our way down to the littered beach to view the wreckage and gossip about the losses. It was a whirlwind of overmastering creative desire that caught up Charles Strickland, tore him from his wife, ruined the lives of Stroeve and Blanche and upset innumerable tidy schemes. Society saw nothing but a most deplorable confusion; Strickland was aware of nothing save an essential freedom.

At the age of forty, Strickland was a heavy-featured monosyllabic stockbroker with an intellectual wife who went in for literary lions. Mrs. Strickland remembered vaguely that

he had dabbled a bit with paints when they were first married, but he had painted very badly and the family seemed to have laughed him out of it. The facts of his life were dull and usual. As a boy fresh from school, he "went into a broker's office without any feeling of distaste. Until he married, he led the ordinary life of his fellows, gambling mildly on the Exchange, interested to the extent of a sovereign or two in the result of the Derby or the Oxford and Cambridge Race. I think he boxed a little in his spare time. On his chimney-piece he had photographs of Mrs. Langtry and Mary Anderson. He read *Punch* and the *Sporting Times*. He went to dances in Hampstead". He was equally usual as a husband — kindly, affable, undemonstrative, no doubt, but also thoroughly sane and respectable. Then unexpectedly he departed for Paris, leaving no word save a brief note to his wife, stating that he would never come back. His wife and her relatives assumed a woman in the case. In the words of Maugham, "whenever a man does anything unexpected, his fellows describe it to the most discreditable motives". But the friend who looks him up to reason with him finds no woman, but a bearded, shabby, sardonic Strickland—alone in one room of a dilapidated hotel — learning to paint.

Told in synopsis, the fable would seem too wildly unreasonable to be taken seriously. It is Somerset Maugham's achievement to have made it real by the accuracy of his circumstance and his finesse in the handling of ricocheted ideas. Nothing is presented to the reader first-hand. Rumours at the second and third and fourth remove crowd upon him, casual impressions sway him, until the fame of Strickland is built up in his mind out of accumulated fragments, as the fame of Shakespeare is forced upon those who have never read a play. The result is attained despite difficulties that an author less sure of his power would have avoided or skirted gingerly. There was no necessity for making Strickland so brutal, sensual, and tongue-tied as he is shown.

"I wondered what a stranger would have taken him

to be, sitting there in his old Norfolk jacket and his unbrushed bowler; his trousers were baggy and his hands were not clean; and his face, with the red stubble of an unshaved chin, the little eyes, and the large, aggressive nose, was uncouth and coarse. His mouth was large, his lips were heavy and sensual”.

One feels instinctively that genius does not take this guise, and that mastery is gained through understanding rather than through demonic impulse. Maugham consciously discards the modern theories of genius, and returns to the romantic notion of revelation and the hidden flame. He denies the potency of the desire for fame, at least in this instance. Strickland cares nothing for his pictures once they are finished. His greatest work is destroyed by his own order. He prefers to live in an out-of-the-way corner. It is a question worth asking whether any man would have been quite content with the joy of fashioning beauty and with that alone.

But whether objection may be raised to the philosophy of art involved in the tale, there is likely to be little but praise for its workmanship and its criticism of life. The author sees nothing squarely. If he errs at all, it is on the side of disbelief. Mrs. Strickland and Blanche Stroeve and Ata, the native girl, make up a trio from which we can derive a whole conception of womanhood. Perhaps it is old-fashioned. It is at least as much so as Shaw's artist man and mother woman, “In the end they get you”, says Strickland, “and you are helpless in their hands. White or brown, they are all the same”.

When one closes the book and looks back over the varied scenes, civilized and barbaric, one has a memory of powerful and inevitable movement and the light and shadow of life itself. The English dinner table, the underworld of Marseilles, the village of Papeete are drawn in strong lines and bold colours that suggest the last printings of Strickland on Tahiti. The book might have gained in epic quality had Mr. Maugham placed the island scenes first as he originally

planned, but as it is, the dramatic effect is heightened. We begin with absolute disbelief in this "dull stock-broker". He seems a meagre personality to follow through three hundred pages. The plot of the narrative is the revelation one by one, of reasons why he is worth following. When we have put the novel by, we may disbelieve in him again if we will, for he is improbable enough, but it is none too easy to shake off the conviction that, for all the agnosticism we can muster, he did exist, all the way from Westminster to the leper's hut, concrete in flesh and blood.

Somewhere it is reported that certain persons came upon Mr. Maugham in New York and charged him with "denuding human nature of its fundamental goodness" in *The Moon and Sixpence*, and, further, that Mr. Maugham replied by saying that he took his model for Strickland from Gauguin. The charge is silly enough. Human nature is, at bottom, never any better than Strickland, and frequently far worse, from a moralist's point of view. But Strickland chose to demolish for himself the pretty temple of niceties and restraints which we are taught to build up from childhood over the black and fuming pit of the subconscious, and the revelation is naturally a shock to the self-worshipping. It is well, no doubt, that few of us care to disrobe mentally, especially in public. But Maugham's defence was quite unsound. Gauguin, the burnt-out Parisian, is no parallel for Strickland. Gauguin fled from a sickly civilization to a healthy barbarism. Strickland was neither burnt-out nor Parisian. He was English; a Philistine, and a barbarian in his own right. There is no explanation of his craving for Tahiti, as he is shown us in *The Moon and Sixpence*, save another form of the impulse that sent out the twelve apostles or drove the swine into the sea. He was inspired or mad or possessed of a devil -- as you please. And Gauguin was merely sated.

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## THE REALISM OF SOMERSET MAUGHAM

### THE PAINTED VEIL.

DOTTIN, Paul. Professor of English, President of the University of Toulouse. Born in Rennes, 1895. Author: *Daniel Defoe et ses romans*, 1924; *Manuel de la Philologie Anglaise*, 1924; *Samuel Richardson*, 1931; *Somerset Maugham et ses romans*, 1928; *Le théâtre de Somerset Maugham*, 1937.

Few novels have been as carefully worked out as *The Painted Veil*. Before writing it Maugham made a point of getting to know China and to understand her inhabitants, in so far as it is possible for a White Devil to understand the Sons of the Dragon. And on the method of composition of *The Painted Veil* we have a very valuable document in the collection of sketches entitled *On a Chinese Screen*, which appeared in November 1922, three years earlier, that is, than the novel.

These are the rapid sketches of an artist who is preparing a major painting, the impressions of a "sentimental traveller" who carefully puts down his reactions in his travel diary. We will find here sentences of pure poetry, like the one about the "walk of a string of camels, heavily laden, which wear the disdainful air of profiteers forced to traverse a world in which many people are not so rich as they"; such evocative descriptions as that of the bamboo fields which, in the mist, recall the hop-gardens of Kent; first class passages like that on "The Song of the River", where the labouring coolies utter their "cries of souls in infinite distress"; and finally we will meet unforgettable characters: the cruel Chinese governor, dishonest and venal, caressing with amorous regard and loving hands a frail and artistic vase of lapis-lazuli; — the missionary, instinctively revulsed by the Chinese, who tries to force himself to love them, and who has broken all contact with Europe so as not to suffer too much in thinking

of the past, — the *taipan*, victim of a mysterious coincidence, who has seen a grave dug without being able to learn whom it is destined for, and who dies the same evening, destroyed by alcohol, — and so many others, white and yellow, who live in our memory because they have lived in reality.

Humorous touches are numerous. Maugham demonstrates for us the usefulness of interminable novels for the unfortunate who travels across the Chinese countryside, and of the phonograph which serves as a link with home. He makes fun of the English socialist who, transplanted to the Far East, shows himself even prouder than the rest of belonging to the "ruling race". He is amused at the stupefaction of the Protestant missionary who has come to China to lead a life of misery and martyrdom, and finds a house complete with the most modern comforts. He stigmatizes the intolerance of another Protestant missionary, who refuses even to speak to a British commercial traveller who has not seen a white man for three months, because the man sells tobacco. He holds forth on the oriental stench which makes all men equal, whereas the invention of 'sanitary conveniences' has destroyed all feelings of equality among the Occidentals. "It is a tragic thought that the first man who pulled the plug of a water closet rang the knell of democracy". He laughs at the professors of the Chinese University, absurdly specialized and utilitarian in their teaching, — at the ship captains, so besotted they know only the bars and brothels of each port. And he freely indulges his good humour in telling of an Englishwoman married to a Chinese, persecuted by his other wives and beaten by him, but unable to make up her mind to leave the conjugal domicile because "there is something in the way his hair grows on his forehead I can't help liking".

In all these sketches we find three principal ideas, ideas which we will find again, novelized and developed, in *The Painted Veil*. First of all, the criticism of the colonial officials, capable of courage and even of recklessness, but pretentious and smug, duped by their Chinese servants who flatter and

despise them; the only interesting ones among them are the disreputable and cynical men for whom life in England would have been impossible. Next, there is the criticism of the wives of these officials: some of them brainless, unable to adapt themselves, desiring only to create for themselves a household which will resemble as far as possible a home in Cheltenham or Tunbridge Wells; others, by contrast, are absurdly devoted to the husbands who are so unworthy of them, and every day perform miracles of altruism, as does poor Mrs. Fanning, the slave of her household. Finally, the criticism of American and English missionaries and the contrasting praise of Catholic priests and convents: these Maugham admires for their tolerance, their tranquil good sense, their love of children. He cites an anecdote that glorifies them, at a terrible expense to their Protestant colleagues; the story of Dr. Saunders, who accosts a minister with these words: "There was a stranger here the other day asking for you. He wanted to know the way to the American Mission. I told him; but I said he wouldn't find anyone there. He seemed rather surprised at that, so I told him that you all went up to the hills in May and didn't come back till September. Then he wished to go to one of the mission schools or to a hospital, but the schools were closed and the hospital was left to the care of native dispensers during the hot season. I told him that he might try the Roman Catholics, who are here all the year round and don't take any holidays. I finally asked him his name. 'Oh, I'm Christ', he said".

This attitude of the author toward the colonials, their wives, and the Catholic Missions was to be clarified in *The Painted Veil*. In the novel the characters were to be based on the people he has met in China and sketched in *On a Chinese Screen*. But he was to make these sketches into a work of art.

Hong-Kong on an afternoon of stifling heat. Two lovers in bed. Suddenly a choked cry: someone outside has tried to open the door. The man leaps under the bed, aided by the

trembling woman. Someone is still trying to open the French windows that open directly on the verandah. Then, nothing more. The woman, Kitty Fane, is wild with terror: in vain her lover, Charlie Townsend, assures her that it is unlikely this has been her cuckolded husband, Walter: doesn't he work all day at the bacteriological laboratory? It could only have been one of the Chinese servants. And here Kitty courageously opens the door. No one. The lovers are reassured and they part tenderly.

Left alone, Kitty muses. She thinks of her lover, and of Dorothy, his wife. Then she goes into the drawing-room; there is a book there which only her husband could have left. So it was he who tried to get into the bedroom. But Kitty is not afraid: she feels strong in the love and support of her lover. If Walter makes a scene she will face him boldly, for she detests him, without having anything to reproach him for. She had only married him in a moment of panic because she was twenty-five and her younger sister had just made a rich marriage. From the beginning he had irritated her with his gravity and his absorption in his work. Shortly after arriving in Hong-Kong she had become the mistress of the handsome Charlie, a colonial under-secretary, who represented her ideal of a man, wordly, a good sportsman, at once tender and brutal. What did it matter now, that Walter knew the truth? There would be a scandal, then two divorces (for Dorothy would be unwilling to stay with an unfaithful husband), and Kitty would be able to marry the man of her dreams.

Now Walter seemed to know nothing; if anything, he was only more distant and taciturn. And yet he looked like a tiger ready to spring. Kitty's nerves were at the breaking point when one morning Walter told her that there was a cholera epidemic at Mei-tan-fu and that he had decided to go there with her. Kitty struggled with herself: This would mean suicide. Walter observed her with contempt, then, changing his tone, spoke of a divorce. She regained her self-possession

and with insolence declared herself sure of Charlie: he replied then that he would agree to a separation on the condition that Charlie be willing to divorce his wife and marry her. Triumphant, she proclaimed her certainty, but she sensed a sudden anxiety when she saw the quick flash of mockery dancing in Walter's eyes.

She hurried to see Charlie, whom she found to have only one thought: no scandal! It would ruin his career. And no divorce from Dorothy: what would become of the children? After all, it was Kitty who had pursued him with her love! And besides, Mei-tan-fu was not really such a dangerous place as it was said to be . . . Kitty was stunned: she now realized that in preparing her to make this demand Walter had forced her to a complete understanding of the egotism and cowardice of her lover. She went home in despair, ready to go to the cholera-stricken city.

It was an endless trip by steamboat on the river, then by palanquin across the rice fields. Walter was so silent, so indifferent that Kitty wondered whether he had gone quite mad. They finally arrived at their bungalow, which the customs inspector, Mr. Waddington, had arranged as comfortably as possible for them. Waddington was a cynical and amusing little man who did his best to make Kitty forget the terrible situation in which she found herself. Through him she learned that everyone considered Walter a hero; he was so indifferent to death that they wondered if he did not actually seek it.

Kitty went to visit the convent, a little corner of France lost in the huge Chinese city. She was amazed to see the nuns risking their lives every day with a good humour and simplicity that brought tears to her eyes.

She began to like Sister Saint-Joseph, a robust country-woman, lively and talkative. She admired the Mother Superior, a great lady at once gentle and firm, commanding and kind. And suffering from feeling herself so insignificant, so useless, Kitty was seized with a passion for sacrifice, and

she too devoted herself as best she could to the care of the abandoned children.

One morning she was ill, and the nuns told her she was pregnant. Walter was moved by the news; he asked if he was the father of the expected child. It would have been easy for Kitty to answer yes; life would once again have become serene and easy. But some unknown force made her tell the truth: "I don't know". Again Walter withdrew into himself.

One night Kitty was waked and hastily led to Walter's bedside. He lay dying, stricken in his turn by the implacable disease. He did not recognize her. She begged his forgiveness, but he did not understand what she was saying. When he died, Kitty did not weep, but her heart was heavy.

Waddington and the nuns now warned her to leave for the sake of her unborn child, to return as soon as possible to civilization. She went back to Hong-Kong. There Dorothy welcomed her with open arms and took her into her home; Charlie was respectfully attentive. But one day she found herself alone with him and she was unable to resist his caresses.

Afterward she was aghast at herself; she began to hate this man who could inflame her senses and do with her as he pleased. In her pride she felt she could never forget her humiliation if she remained at the scene of her surrender. She returned to England; her father, now widowed, welcomed her with joy. China was far away, and so was her disgrace.

Everywhere Kitty breathed the air of freedom. Now she thought of the child to be born, and she swore solemnly that she would not raise him for the world or for society, but that she would make him a proud and independent man who could scorn convention and courageously follow his chosen way of life.

*The Painted Veil* is, from the artistic point of view, Maugham's masterpiece. The plot develops inexorably to the climax, which is Kitty's departure for China. thenceforth we have the logical consequences of resolutions which have been

taken under the pressure of tragic events. We are reminded of the construction of the best Shakesperean plays, in which the development is absolutely the same. Maugham's style, more concise and unencumbered than ever, is impeccable, without seeming laboured; and it is suited to his subject, which would have been banal without his dramatic talent. When we close the book, we are almost ashamed of having been so thoroughly captivated by a story of adultery. Still, the fact is there: our interest has not flagged an instant. Wherein lies the author's secret? How has he found the means of creating such a close communion of ideas with the reader?

We believe that the answer is to be found in a study of Maugham's realism: he has reached a state of equilibrium; the naturalistic excesses of the young beginner have disappeared. With his sobriety, his sense of proportion, his almost French simplicity, Maugham has introduced into the history of English literature the formula of integral realism.

First of all, his attitude toward sexual questions is free of all hypocrisy, of all 'cant'. For the majority of the Victorians, 'love' and 'sex' were two very different and distinct things. Love went only so far as a kiss on the lips. As for sex, that was the unmentionable; at least people were always thinking about it and never talked about it. Yet Maugham does not indulge in gratuitous carnal descriptions. He no longer gives in, as so many other literary anarchists do (we think primarily of Joyce), to the facile desire to scandalize the bourgeois reactionaries. But he is not shocked by the attractions of the body or the brutal gratification of the senses. He does not use asterisks to suggest vicious developments. He has a horror of pornography. He says what is to be said, calmly, coldly, cruelly. The opening scene of *The Painted Veil* is a model of realistic restraint: two lovers in bed, someone outside trying to open the door. Terror: is it the duped husband? Then in the joy of the flesh, the two lovers forget their danger: they persuade themselves that it was a servant. That is all:

no exaggerated description of amorous voluptuousness. Like all of Maugham's heroes, the principal character of *The Painted Veil* gives in to her instincts and, carried along by the mysterious current of destiny, makes no effort to foresee the future. Kitty has acted upon the drives of her unsatisfied senses. It was odious to her to submit to the caresses of her husband; he lacked elegance, he danced poorly, the only game he could play was bridge; his body aroused in her no excitement, no satisfied thrill; he seemed downright grotesque to her, this heavy man of science, when, after possessing her, he would employ baby-talk. On the other hand, Charlie was a fine athlete, an excellent dancer; his hands were well cared for. And he was almost hers alone, for according to his own avowal, his intimate relations with his legitimate wife Dorothy were becoming increasingly rare. The months go by, and Kitty gets proof that Charlie is egotistical, devoid of any grandeur of soul. She despises him, but his body still calls out to hers; she falls into his arms again, but not without a profound sense of personal shame, for she judges herself more vile than the prostitute who is earning her living.

Let us not think of her as a great lover; except in rare moments when she is carried away by her senses, she thinks of her lover as a companion for dancing, tennis, and the theatre, a *cavalier servente* and a 'partner' who flatters her feminine vanity. The carnal act itself seemed to her ridiculous, ugly, and unimportant; what is this surrender of the body, since in such moments woman ceases to be a woman to become a bitch in heat? And is it not absurdly pretentious for a man to want to know, at all costs, if a child is his? The part the man plays in procreation is so insignificant that he is hardly justified in showing joy or making jealous scenes.

One morning Kitty is nauseated; she vomits; she is nervous. But the nuns of the Chinese convent quite frankly tell her the truth: she is pregnant. One should compare this chapter in *The Painted Veil* with a famous passage in *The Blue Lagoon*, a highly successful book by the novelist De



Vere Stacpoole. Two adolescents, alone and naked on an atoll in the South Seas, copulate and procreate; however, all that is said is of birds, a nest, a baby found in the forest, etc. It is clear that Maugham's absolutely sane frankness gives the illusion of real life, while the Victorian reticence of Stacpoole leads us into a fairy tale. Maugham will doubtless be recognized in time as one of the novelists who have contributed most to removing from the English literary vocabulary the word 'improper'.

The same realism is apparent in the psychological studies of the characters in *The Painted Veil*. They are completely true to life, presented straightforwardly and without cynicism; they are great and small, noble and vile. They are all these things at once. They are not heroes of fiction in the proper sense of the word. They try to overcome their subconscious nature, the dark, animal forces within them. They do not always succeed. Take, for example, Kitty, odious at first sight, yet on reflection you are not certain whether to hate or pity her. She does not merit hate, because she is the victim of her British education: "It's not fair to blame me because I was silly and frivolous and vulgar. I was brought up like that. All the girls I know are like that . . .". "Like that": that is to say, imbued with the idea that woman is a superior being, uniquely destined for a life of idleness amid jewels and flowers. Kitty and her mother find it perfectly natural that the *paterfamilias* should exhaust himself to get money for their luxurious parties, and when the money runs out, all they feel for the worn out old man is an exasperated disdain. The end of existence? For Kitty, it is a rich marriage, for she is beautiful, and beauty sells at a high price. Education is unnecessary: you need only enough to impress the young aristocrats and the sons of the great industrialists. "Silly, frivolous, without brains" — so her husband describes her. She is lazy, without grandeur of soul, incapable of understanding sacrifice; haven't people always sacrificed themselves for her? In her vanity as a pretty girl, she cannot

conceive that she has a duty to anyone; she considers it improper for anyone to reproach her for having committed adultery, and she never once dreams that anyone would stop loving her.

What saves her is her pride and her sense of fair play. Having given herself again, in a moment of madness, to her cowardly and contemptible lover, she feels herself humiliated; or rather, as in the case of Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe*, her soul has been humiliated in her sullied body. She finds herself again by facing her responsibilities. The cruel lesson of life, the experience painfully acquired, leads her to reflection. She realizes that love is what woman must offer in recompense for the pains man takes to provide her with luxury. She sees that the orientation of her life has been false: "I'm not going to bring a child into the world, and love her and bring her up, just so that some man may want to sleep with her so much that he's willing to provide her with board and lodging for the rest of her life . . .". The novel ends with this terrible condemnation of actual British education. The regenerated Kitty serves as a spokesman for the younger generation which seeks at any price to free itself from the mercantile conceptions of the Victorian upper middle class.

The other characters of *The Painted Veil* are less complex, less fully analyzed than Kitty Fane. But they are no less alive. Charlie is a Lovelace, disdained by Satan: his good looks, his engaging manners, his sympathetic and decisive air disguise a heart profoundly egotistical, the cowardly and ignoble heart of the ladies' man. Waddington is a cockney transplanted to the colonies but able to feel at ease anywhere. In Walter, the scientist, there are two forces in conflict: the serene intelligence which has kept to one straight path, an austere path on which there is only peace and work; and the tormented man in love, who finally triumphs by destroying energy, annihilating will, and creating a fixed idea, the longing for death.

These characters do not, like so many heroes in novels, speak with the hidden desire to flatter the vanity of the English reader. The realistic Maugham has them occasionally state some disagreeable truths. "From the point of view of society", Walter declares, "the man of science does not exist". Charlie is generally cynical in his remarks: one of the few advantages of his position as a government official in the colonies is his power to terrorize the natives. But it is Waddington, the sceptical *bon enfant*, who least disguises his real thoughts: "I am not a Catholic. I describe myself as a member of the Church of England, which I suppose is an inoffensive way of saying that you don't believe in anything very much". It is he who expresses the philosophy of the book by reminding us of old Cronshaw's Persian rug: "Some of us look for the Way in opium and some in God, some of us in whisky and some in love. It is all the same Way and it leads nowhither".

The piercing, cruel eye of Somerset Maugham, which discerns the mean motives behind the greatest acts, is not, however, insensible to beauty. For there is much beauty in this world for those who know how to see it: the beauty of nature in a Chinese city, heaped with corpses and covered with filth, when the sun dispels the morning mists and reveals the green and yellow roofs of the barbarous town; and especially the beauty of souls, the souls of nuns who have left their native lands, their home-farms or historic castles on the Loire — to strive for an almost inaccessible ideal; the beauty of these simple hearts, of these childlike faces which recall "nature gilded by autumn", the beauty of their smiles, "like a ray of sunlight on a savage and desolate heath", the beauty of their perpetual sacrifices, the beauty of their heroism . . .

The practical English, businessmen at heart, find this life of devotion a little absurd. Waddington objects to their lack of common sense: "Supposing there is no life everlasting. Think what it means if death is really the end of all things.

They've given up all for nothing. They've been cheated. They're dupes". But all sense their beauty: at the depths of their hearts they admire it. Kitty, although she rebels, is dominated, subjugated by the Mother Superior; she speaks to her of her past but succeeds only in bringing to this pure face a shadow of fugitive suffering and calling forth this splendid lesson: "Remember that it is nothing to do your duty, that is demanded of you and is no more meritorious than to wash your hands when they are dirty; the only thing that counts is the love of duty; when love and duty are one, then grace is in you and you will enjoy a happiness which passes all understanding". This is an ideal truth, a lesson of moral beauty that dominates the novel and keeps it from leaving an impression of absolute pessimism. Maugham has not destroyed the real balance between joy and sorrow, ugliness and beauty. Because of this his bitterest enemy could find nothing to criticize in his realism; the exact vision of life that was already evident in *Liza of Lambeth* has developed an absolute purity in proportion as the artist in Maugham has displaced the doctor.

On the other hand, Maugham has by-passed the Victorian era to rejoin the old tradition of 18th century English novelists; the principal element of his realism, as far as form is concerned, is the precise recording of small details, which gives *The Painted Veil* its complete credibility. In the period of Defoe and Richardson, this precision was necessary since fiction had not yet been fully accepted as a genre. In Maugham it is these insignificant but well-chosen details that give the impression of reality. They also produce excellent effects of surprise or terror. The shudder conveyed to the reader by the slow turning of the knobs on the French doors, apparently independent of any outside agency, in the first chapter of *The Painted Veil*, is equalled only by Robinson Crusoe's shudder at the sight of the footprint in the sand. Likewise, the discovery of adultery is not presented in loud, melodramatic scenes; the guilty wife is frightened by words

so commonplace they seem sinister, tones of voice which seems to come from great distances, sudden but meaningless gestures, and, most of all, fixed gazes into nothingness. And finally, more evocative than any of the great scenes, details associated with Walter's death remain in our minds: the damp eyes of an old Chinese colonel, a shadow on the forehead of the dying man and two tears on his cheeks, the whitewashed walls, a verse from Goldsmith's "Elegy", a cigarette from which the smoke is still rising . . . It was by such small touches as these that Richardson made all Europe weep . . . But the realistic art of Maugham is surer, more finished, and it is not likely that *The Painted Veil* will ever sink into oblivion as *Clarissa Harlowe* has done.

With *The Painted Veil* Maugham has reached a height that would have seemed almost inaccessible for a writer: it will be hard for him to climb higher unless he abandons this genre which he has created, a novel intermediary between the exotic novel and the naturalistic. He would do better to attack other mountains, in other regions, even if they have already been explored: we are sure that he will succeed in discovering new paths.

This essay appeared in the book *W. Somerset Maugham et ses romans* (Paris 1928). Translated from the French by K. W. Jonas and reprinted by permission of P. Dottin.

## THOMAS HARDY VEILED

### CAKES AND ALE

VAN DOREN, Mark. Author, critic, Professor of English, Columbia University, since 1942. Born in Hope, Ill., 1894. Ph.D. Literary Editor of *The Nation*, 1924-1928. Author: *Henry David Thoreau*, 1916; *The Poetry of John Dryden*, 1920; *American and British Literature Since 1890* (with Carl Van Doren); *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, 1927; *Studies in Metaphysical Poetry* (with Theodore Spencer), 1939; *Collected Poems* (Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, 1939); *Liberal Education*, 1943; *New Poems*, 1948; *Nathaniel Hawthorne*, 1949.

If Edward Driffield, the misty and pathetic hero of W. Somerset Maugham's witty and scandalous novel, is Thomas Hardy, and everybody seems to think he is, then Mr. Maugham has made a contribution of no small importance to our understanding of Hardy. Not that he needs to be taken literally in all the details of his merciless sketch, and not that he has failed to take safe cover behind a falsification of the facts. For instance, Driffield lived not in the south-west but in the south-east of England; he writes not a line of poetry; and his first marriage, so far as I can judge, bears no resemblance to Hardy's, having in it both more joy and more affliction. As for his second marriage, the less said the better, the second Mrs. Hardy being still alive. Not that we need to assume any intention on Mr. Maugham's part to represent the second Mrs. Hardy by the second Mrs. Driffield. But he has been bold enough, after making it impossible for us not to think of Hardy when we see the name of Driffield, to give Driffield a new wife who is, to say the least, deplorable. It took nerve to do that. But of course it takes nerve to write a satire, and Mr. Maugham is one of the few who can.

The satire, the joke, is on those who would think, as most of Mr. Maugham's persons do think, that the second Mrs. Driffield is a better and more useful woman than the first. The first, by name Rosie, is an ethereal nymphomaniac who betrays her husband with all his friends, including the novelist Willie Ashenden, the teller of the story. She was a barmaid, to begin with, but now she is the charming if ignorant wife of a vulgar little author. Ashenden, by the way, and probably Mr. Maugham, cannot admire the works of Driffield, who wears loud, ludicrous clothes and manages to keep his character, if he has any, pretty well hidden behind the more obvious one possessed by Rosie. Rosie, one hopes, is as complacent to him as she is to his friends. Yet her final desertion of him is a blow; and the twenty-five years which follow in the company of a wife who pets him, puts him forward, makes him respectable, and refurnishes his house with period pieces are a bore. Through both series of tribulations Driffield steers a bewildered, retiring course — a little animal wounded in some part which we cannot see and bleeding very slowly to death.

"The face you saw was a mask", says Ashenden toward the end. "I had an impression that the real man, to his death unknown and lonely, was a wraith that went a silent way unseen between the writer of his books and the fellow who led his life, and smiled with ironical detachment at the two puppets that the world took for Edward Driffield". Well, perhaps that is all there is to say about Thomas Hardy. Confronted as I have often been with the difficulty of connecting Hardy with his books, I find myself attracted to a theory that there was a third existence, a ghost, between the two. Furthermore, I suspect that this may be universally true of authors. So that Mr. Maugham, reckless as he may have been with certain lives, would seem to have written a true book.

He has also, as I have said, written a witty one. *Cakes and*

SOMERSET MAUGHAM

*Ale* is slight, very slight; but it abounds with observations and epigrams that are always clear, always bitter, and frequently wise.\*

\*The reader is advised to compare this article with Maugham's new introduction to his favourite novel which was first published in *The New York Times Book Review* of March 19, 1950.

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## THE NARROW CORNER

CORDELL, Richard A.

*See page 107*

One may define an entertaining novel as one which has an absorbing story, an agreeable style free of irritating eccentricities, and a group of living and diversified characters who are interesting in themselves; and which, in addition, may unobtrusively contain what Somerset Maugham calls the author's private view of the universe, for as an artist a novelist may impose design upon the materials. Whatever one's definition, there are few intelligent readers who would not find *The Narrow Corner* entertaining. Its reception by the critics was somewhat amusing. The average review was patronizing. More than one critic admitted that the story was unfolded in a masterly fashion and that it was impossible not to finish the book once it was begun; but their praise was temperate, for here was a novel unconcerned with problems and providing no sweeping view of an era or a society. It was simply entertaining.

Of the five principal characters one appears in *The Moon and Sixpence* and another in "The Stranger", a sketch in *On a Chinese Screen*. Captain Nichols of *The Moon and Sixpence* is a beachcomber who helps Charles Strickland secure passage from Marseilles to the South Seas. In "The Stranger" Dr. Saunders annoys a missionary who has fled from the steaming Chinese city to the cool of the hills. Both men are pictured just as we find them in *The Narrow Corner*. The novelist has said that these preliminary sketches did not dismiss these two attractive camps from his mind, and that eventually their story had to be written. The other characters are more heterogeneous. Fred Blake is a commonplace young fellow with three claims to eminence: his skill at dancing and at cribbage and his extraordinary good looks. Unfortunately these advantages bring about his tragic end. Erik

Christensen is a Scandinavian giant, gentle and idealistic. His idealism brings about his tragedy. Louise Frith is a Nordic jewel set in the silver South Sea, free of inhibitions and coldly determined not to let herself be possessed. When the lives of these five people touch, tragedy comes not to those without morals but to those without philosophy. The innocent perish through their weakness, but the unscrupulous survive through their strength.

In no other novel has Somerset Maugham combined wit, philosophy, mystery, humour, and definite scrutiny of character and motive so successfully as in *The Narrow Corner*. The central character is Dr. Saunders, whose shady activities in his profession have caused his removal from the Register; he then settles in China and succeeds in his practice. He has acquired an ironical philosophy, a deep sense of humour, and a complete tolerance of other people's vices. He is shrewd and takes nothing at its face value. Without morals or faith or human ties, he is one of the happiest of all Mr. Maugham's characters. He is a hedonist, but in addition to good food, drink, and comfort he enjoys watching the spectacle of human life and is diverted by the phenomena of human behaviour. His philosophy of life is approximately that of Philip Carey's at the end of *Of Human Bondage* and Somerset Maugham's in *The Summing Up*. He accepts without surprise the complexity and unaccountability of human nature. He regards illusions and sincere idealism as menaces to happiness, and fraudulent idealism as the most revolting of vices. He rejects asceticism and has learned to regret nothing. "Life is short, nature is hostile, and man is ridiculous; but oddly enough most misfortunes have their compensations, and with a certain humour and a good deal of horse-sense one can make a fairly good job of what is after all a matter of very small consequence". He is quick to detect uncalculated goodness, and that exquisite phrase "the beauty of holiness" has a meaning for him. He has acquired resignation "by the help of an unfailing sense of the ridiculous".

And at the end of the book he looks toward the future with confidence, sure of his spiritual independence, free of human bondage. "It was an exquisite pleasure to him to know that there was no one in the world who was essential to his peace of mind". It is characteristic of Somerset Maugham's sense of humour that he should give to a minor rogue so much of his own philosophy of life.

Captain Nichols is less complex. He is a rascal of the first order, and does not flinch even at murder when it is to his advantage. But he is not without a sense of humour, and is almost without fear. His courageous behaviour during the storm would well become a saint in a similar crisis. Dishonest, shifty, untrustworthy, he nevertheless possesses a dauntless courage, which deserts him only when Mrs. Nichols, prim, calm, and determined, appears on the scene and reduces him at once to a cringing subjection.

Louise Frith is in some ways the most striking character in *The Narrow Corner*. The women of Somerset Maugham's novels are highly individualized. In the characterizations of Liza, Bertha Ley, Mildred, Blanche Stroeve, Kitty Fane, Rosie Driffield, Louise Frith, and Julia Lambert he does not repeat himself. His estimation of women in his fiction and plays is usually harsh and unflattering, but he writes with affection of Rosie, and with cold admiration of Louise. Louise Frith is intelligent and not without culture and sophistication, but she is an amoral primitive. She lives by instinct, but uses her intelligence to guard her independence, which thoughtless submission to her instincts would destroy. She knows neither inhibitions nor remorse. When her infidelity drives Erik to suicide, she herself takes the edge off the tragedy by her cold analysis:

"I'm dreadfully sorry he's dead. I owe a great deal to him. But I'm not to blame . . . He didn't know it, but it wasn't me he loved, it was my mother. She knew it and at the end I think she loved him, too . . . What he loved in me was my mother, and he never knew that either. . . . You

blame me. Anyone would. I don't blame myself. Erik killed himself because I'd fallen short of the ideal he'd made of me. If he'd loved me he might have killed me or he might have forgiven me. . . . I tell you he didn't love me . . . He loved his ideal. My mother's beauty and my mother's qualities in me and those Shakespeare heroines of his and the princesses in Hans Andersen's fairy tales. What right have people to make an image after their own heart and force it on you and be angry if it doesn't fit you? He wanted to imprison me in his ideal — and Fred in his way was the same. When he lay by my side that night he said he'd like to stay here always on this island, and marry me and cultivate the plantation, and I don't know what else. He wanted, too, to imprison me in his dream. But I am I. I don't want to dream anyone else's dream. I want to dream my own. All that's happened is terrible and my heart is heavy, but at the back of my mind it's given me freedom".

"Short, therefore, is man's life, and narrow is the corner on the earth wherein he dwells". *The Narrow Corner* might, too, have been called *Of Human Bondage*. For although on the surface it is a story of mystery and tragic adventure, it is leavened with philosophy and lifted far above the average novel by its penetrating study of character. For Somerset Maugham is more than a great story-teller; he knows people, knows that man is neither good nor bad and that thinking will not make him so. There are brief descriptive passages of rare beauty, although he does not idealize the South Seas. There is comedy, too; especially memorable in its grim humour is the burial of the Japanese diver. The novelist does not fall into the Dickensian trap of hyperbolising the eccentricities of Frith and his father-in-law or the stomach distresses of Captain Nichols. *The Narrow Corner* has proportion, restraint, suavity, tolerance, understanding. It is a wise book, and makes no sentimental concessions either to the romantic setting or the dramatic theme of the story.

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## THE TECHNICIAN

### CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY

WAUGH, Evelyn Arthur St. John. British author. Born 1903. Author: *Rossetti*, 1928; *Decline and Fall*, 1928; *Remote People*, 1932; *Waugh in Abyssinia*, 1936; *When the Going was Good*, 1946; *The Loved One*, 1948; *Modern Europe*, 1949; *Helena*, 1950.

It is often amusing when reading the book of an established writer to pretend to oneself that his name is unknown, and that one has casually picked up a first novel, and to ask whether, if one were a publisher's reader, one would recommend its acceptance without misgivings; if one were a critic, whether one would foretell its author's brilliant future. The result is sometimes illuminating. In the case of Mr. Maugham, however, this kind of make-belief fails in the first page. One realises immediately that one is dealing with the work of a highly experienced writer, and one reads it with a feeling of increasing respect for his mastery of his trade. One has the same delight as in watching a first-class cabinet-maker cutting dovetails; in the days of dictated "thinking-aloud" writing Mr. Maugham's accomplishment is yearly more exhilarating. He is, I believe, the only living studio-master under whom one can study with profit. He has no marked idiosyncrasies which threaten the pupil with bad habits. His virtues of accuracy, economy, and control are those most lacking today among his juniors.

For pure technical felicity I think his new novel is his best. It is the story of a Christmas holiday in Paris of a well-to-do, well-mannered, mildly cultured and quite exceptionally charming young Englishman. The important point about the hero is that he is not a prig. It is a common complaint that in modern novels there are too few likeable characters. Well, here is Charley. He goes to Paris for a few days' treat. The boy, Simon, who, until a year or two before, had been his

best friend, is living there as a journalist. One of Charley's motives in coming is to renew their friendship. He finds a monomaniac. Simon had had an unhappy upbringing. Charley, in fact, was the sole being who had given him affection, and he had returned it fully. Now the perverse conditions of his childhood have reasserted their importance. He has developed a lust for power which takes the form of the ambition to be chief of the secret police under the political régime which he foresees in England — a régime to be established by communists, but in Simon's eyes bereft of all features except power.

To fit himself for this career he adopts a kind of satanic asceticism, physical and spiritual. No monk struggled more ruthlessly to expel sin than Simon struggles to expel goodness. His love for Charley is one of the things he is seeking to turn out of his life. Outrageous as his character is, and ludicrous as he would appear in other hands than Mr. Maugham's, he is here completely convincing. Not unnaturally Charley finds the encounter an unhappy prelude to the good time he has promised himself. At a house of ill-fame — whose *sous-maitresse* deliciously says, "Sometimes I think the life we lead is a little narrow" — he meets a Russian with whom, platonically and reluctantly, he spends the whole of his little holiday. She is the wife of a murderer, and she is working as a prostitute with the preposterous belief that she can thus expiate her husband's crime — preposterous, but again absolutely convincing. Mr. Maugham has elsewhere, more than once, given evidence of the belief that association with a Russian is a necessary part of an Englishman's adult education. Lydia teaches Charley to admire Chardin — at least she teaches him by her own intense response to Chardin what it is to look at a picture. She tells him the story of her own disastrous marriage to a habitual criminal. This recitation occupies the greater part of the book. It is brilliantly done and needs studying closely in detail; the transitions from direct speech to stylised narrative, the change of narrator as

Simon takes up part of the story, the suspense that is created even though the reader already knows what the climax will be, are models of technique. Charley meets in her company two returned convicts from Cayenne, one of whom has stayed on an extra two years in order to befriend his companion. He has some further conversations with Simon, ending in a brutal parting. Then rather glumly he returns home. His family receive him with joy; his father with a kind of vicarious lubricity. The last sentence is this: "Only one thing has happened to him, it was rather curious when you came to think of it, and he didn't just then quite know what to do about it: the bottom had fallen out of his world".

But what has really happened is that the bottom has fallen out of Mr. Maugham's book in this prodigious piece of bathos. All that inimitable artistry to end in this climax? For what does it amount to? Charley had led what is called a sheltered life, meeting mostly people who led the same kind of life, or who accepted it as normal. In Paris he has been rather roughly introduced to some people with quite different ideas and habits. He must have known, intellectually, that they existed; he must have known that there were head-hunters in Borneo and monks in Tibet and lunatics in asylums who had totally different views of the universe. What was before an intellectual abstraction is now real and concrete to him. All he had learned is the heterogeneity of mankind. It is a valuable lesson; some people never learn it. But his own virtues of kindness and tolerance and humour and honesty are still virtues, his bed is still as comfortable and his dinner as satisfying, he has not received any compelling call, such as does apparently from time to time change people's lives, to any different destiny. He has lost a friend who, anyway, has not meant much to him in recent years; otherwise he has merely had an instructive and profitable holiday, and he will be just the same kind of fellow in future with a slightly wider and wiser outlook.

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## MAUGHAM AND THE TWO MYTHS

### *THE RAZOR'S EDGE*

PAUL, David. Author, poet, critic. Born 1914. Author of poems, essays and sketches, reviewer for various English periodicals. Received an Atlantic Literary Award in 1949.

If curiosity is one of the chief requisites of the novelist, then Mr. Somerset Maugham has it in abundance; indeed, even a superficial glance at his many works will show that he has enough, and more than enough, of this quality to suffice for two or three novelists. The trouble is, as a closer examination will soon show, that the degree of intuition or understanding which accompanies it never pierces beyond a certain level. Like another cosmopolitan, Paul Morand, the range in width of his observation is more or less unconfined; but as to depth, it would be misleading to speak of it in terms of range, because it is slight and remains steadfastly within the same limit. His uniformity in this respect is well mirrored by the even and unhesitating banality of his style. It is a style not altogether without distinction, but it is distinguished in a curious way by the steadfast exclusion of anything but the most limited research in the choice of words. Alain-Fournier has defined the task of a stylist as "*la recherche longue des mots qui redonnent l'impression première et complète*", and the definition may here be negatively applied. For the impression that Mr. Maugham's words give is, on the contrary, secondary and incomplete. This happens to be all to his advantage as far as his principal gift is concerned, for he is, above everything else, a master of narrative -- one of the greatest in the language. Words that give the primary and complete impression would be of dubious advantage to the story-teller, as they administer the kind of shock that holds up the narrative, instead of urging the reader on. Maugham has all the traditional tricks of the



story-teller, as well as some peculiar to himself—the apparent indirectness of movement which reveals itself retrospectively as the covering of the shortest distance between the necessary points, the judiciously placed parentheses to provide breathing-spells, the seemingly complex weaving backwards and forwards, which makes for a much speedier narrative than would a direct approach. He even carries consideration of the reader to the extreme of informing him in advance which passages may be safely skipped as far as the general purpose of the story is concerned. This brings us to a complication. For though he is above all else a narrator, Maugham does not see himself simply as that and nothing more. In spite of his constant concern to beguile the reader,<sup>24</sup> his purpose does not end there. He has views to express and, in his most recent novel, a message to convey.

Indeed it is in this book, *The Razor's Edge*, that he warns us that the chapter which may most conveniently be skipped as far as the story is concerned also contains the central purpose of the book, without which it would not have been written. This is the chapter which gives us the principal and final evolutions of Larry in his search for a belief and a way of life. Our interest in Larry's possible attainments in this respect have already been reinforced (characteristically enough) by admiration for the tricks he can do. We have seen him charm away violent and incurable headaches with the aid of suggestion and a Greek coin; and if he does not perform the Indian rope-trick (which would bore us, anyway, by overtaxing our belief) he does perform engaging tricks of vicarious levitation on his friends and finally, to clinch credulity, on the author himself. With his prowess in mind, the author must have been convinced that we would 'read on' in spite of the warning. A man who can make you lift your hands above your head, without your volition, must necessarily have an interesting philosophy of life.

It is in connection with his views, and with the curiosity that has already been remarked, that one may draw attention

to a singular talent which Maugham has displayed on more than one occasion, though never more signally than in his latest novel. I can only describe it as a sensitivity to current mythology as it is in process of formation, an intuitive feeling for the shifts and fashions in contemporary impulse and aspiration as they take place. It is this which makes him, in spite of the consciousness of age which he does not conceal, and the worn Edwardian quality of his style, so surprisingly up to date. One cannot but admire the astuteness of the choice of theme as well as the treatment of it. He revealed the same flair, along with the same limitations, in a much earlier novel, one of his best, and best known — *The Moon and Sixpence*. In this he drew for material on the life, or such facts as were then known of the life of Gauguin, a life whose legendary quality was rapidly becoming a symbol. Gauguin, along with Rimbaud, is the chief incarnation of the modern myth of the artist. (Why, by the way, has not Maugham written a novel about Rimbaud? Such a novel would certainly make beguiling reading.) Now though everyone is not interested in modern painting or modern poetry, everyone is perforce interested in a modern myth, because it is something to which everyone has contributed. All must come within its magnetic field. In the territory of the myth, whether that of *Œdipus* or Arthur, Landru or Bluebeard, T. E. Lawrence or Gauguin, we are on terms of equality and community. We share to a certain degree the qualities of audience and hero, hunter and hunted, admirer and admired. I have compared the myth to a magnetic field because its importance and attraction lie in the fact that it maps and unifies the forces of the emotions. The genesis and development of myths has not been systematically defined, but it can be said that they arise from and satisfy some contemporary human need — they resolve an emotional puzzle. Though the works of art they generate remain valid in the human imagination, the myths themselves grow old and decline. The *Œdipus* myth, three thousand years old, has at length met its

end in the rational explanation put forward by Freud. The emotional and artistic resolution offered by the myth itself is no longer required.

The artist-outcast is a figure of the romantic myths which arose after the advent of industrialism, and because of it. Industrialisation imposes a routine, not based on tradition or any system of beliefs, but simply of the motives of the machine — the saving of time, the non-creative multiplication of production, speed, money. The process of production becomes so sectionalised that all creative sense is lost. For the more fortunate, standards of comfort were created which tended to dull or extinguish the sense of any other standards. Direct contact with the feelings, and the expression of them, became dangerous; and art consequently became something of an outlaw. Even where it tried to conform it had no secure place in the new order, and steadily lost importance. In the symbolic figure of the artist, modern man realises the double satisfaction of escaping from conditions which (whether unconsciously or not) he finds intolerable, and at the same time of condemning that escape because it defies the laws of industrial society. In the Gauguin story as recreated by Maugham, the symbolism is often heightened: for example, the escape is double, both into the world of art, the 'unconventional' artist's life, and into the South Seas. (Myth has its own geography, and for most of us it is still more significant than the science. Lawrence evokes Arabia as Arthur Camelot.) Having escaped from his life of social comfort and respectability, the hero begins to behave with all the ruthlessness that psychoanalysts attribute to the liberated id. He is morally guilty of rape and murder. He shows no scruple and no consideration for others, either in attaining his ends or in satisfying his whims. Then the social conscience is satisfied by his horrible death from leprosy — and last and most telling touch of all, the works of art which crowned his achievement and which, judging from the description would have shocked any town council, are

destroyed. The town councillor who reads may at once gloat and satisfy the desire for condemnation and destruction.

*The Moon and Sixpence* was written a considerable time ago, and since then many features of the myth have become commonplace, and do not elicit the full response they once did. The myth has begun to lose some of its actuality with the gradual reabsorption of the artist into daily life in the functions of film scenarist or poster designer, or the conventional recognition of new industrial types of artist — the film director or the photographer. We will better appreciate Maugham's aptitude for seizing the outlines of current mythology as it forms and using them for his purposes from a consideration of his most recent work, *The Razor's Edge*, published in this country in 1944. It embodies the newest and most modish of myths, that of the Yogi, whose emergence was first given critical consideration in an essay, now famous, by Arthur Koestler. Larry, the happy and beautiful hero of the novel, is the new Parsifal. He is pure ideal, and does not, like the artist hero, embody the scapegoat as well. He cannot realise our dreams for us by escaping to the South Seas. The South Seas are now better known as a zone of the Pacific, and have other associations. The weight of mechanised civilization has now become so heavy and widespread that escape in place is no longer possible. He can only escape by a process of spiritual levitation, or non-attachment. He has been to India; but his movements very adequately symbolise his spiritual condition. He travels light, and even as he travels he continues to shed personal luggage and spiritual attachments. He is not an artist — that would be another form of attachment — although he writes a book. Unlike the artist again, he is not a seducer. If he is not a virgin, like Parsifal, he is sexually, as otherwise, non-attached. He begins by accepting sex whenever it is forced upon him by importunate women, but when we last see him, before he withdraws into the cauldron which is America, he has abjured sex altogether, as a clog on the spiritual faculties.

A pilot at seventeen in the first World War, he has been precociously passed through the fiery ordeal of modern civilisation and has realised its worst implications. At the same time, aloft in a 'plane, he experiences a physical foretaste of that pure, serene non-attachment which he is later to achieve in spiritual terms. The sensation is described in words that Hollywood will have no difficulty in understanding:

"In the air, 'way up, I felt that I was part of something very great and very beautiful. I didn't know what it was all about, I only knew that I wasn't alone any more, by myself as I was, two thousand feet up, but that I belonged. I can't help it if it sounds silly. When I was flying above the clouds and they were like an enormous flock of sheep below me, I felt that I was at home with infinitude".

At home with infinitude. The words have a curiously cosy sound to modern ears, now that the finite has taken on so many unbearable forms, and in its smallest calculable form seems to offer only incalculable threat.

After his brief but adequate experience as a war hero, Larry returns to his home in Illinois, and then embarks on his years of wandering and study. He is no penniless artist, living on debts. He loafes engagingly, on three thousand a year. Later he sheds his income, but not until he has acquired wisdom. Unlike the artist again, he is 'keen on mechanics', and as a rest from his studies he works in a coalmine, where he proves an unqualified asset. So far from being given to bouts of temperament, he is a model of serenity. He is unassuming and frank, and mysterious without being secretive, except as to his address. — For the new hero has no home. He comes to grips with established religion in the person of a Benedictine monk. But "I couldn't believe. I wanted to believe, but I couldn't believe in a God who wasn't any better than the ordinary decent man". Hearing the monks praying for their daily bread, "it semed to me that if an omnipotent creator was not prepared to provide his creatures with the necessities of existence, material and spiritual, he'd

have done better not to create them". He is bored with the Christian preoccupation with sin, which is due for the most part to heredity, which cannot be helped, or to environment, which cannot be chosen. His farewell to the monk is significant.

"I'm afraid I've been a disappointment to you, Father", I said. "No", he answered. "You are a deeply religious man who doesn't believe in God. God will seek you out. You'll come back. Whether here or elsewhere only God can tell" '.

Almost at once he goes to India. Here he finds what he wants. We are not very clearly informed as to what it is, unless it is simply a state of total detachment, which is symbolised by his giving up his three thousand a year — except for a small sum to keep him for six months at a coast resort in France, before he finally returns to his homeland. It is vaguely indicated that he has a mission in returning to America, presumably to leaven the unspiritual lump by communicating the forms of trance. For he has a trance, just before leaving India, which is described in the usual terms.

"I had a strange sensation, a tingling that arose in my feet and travelled up to my head, and I felt as though I were suddenly released from my body, and as pure spirit partook of a loveliness I had never conceived. I had a sense that a knowledge more than human possessed me, so that everything that had been confused was clear, and everything that had perplexed me was explained. No words can tell the ecstasy of my bliss".

It must be mentioned that an examination of the central idea of this novel gives no indication of its total qualities. There is much in it besides, and it is all most accomplished and entertaining. Rarely have plot and character been so judiciously geared together, so that the development of the one seems noiselessly to propel the other. The principal function of Larry in the scheme of the book is to express and enforce the author's sense of disillusionment with the world that ended in 1940. Perhaps the sense of disillusionment

arose *because* that world ended, because it was not durable enough to survive, or resourceful enough to escape. Even in Mr. Maugham's world there is now no longer a place of escape. He can only offer us escape into another dimension, inwards into trance — but trance, he hastens to assure us, "of the same order as the mystics have had all over the world through all the centuries: Brahmins in India, Sufis in Persia, Catholics in Spain, Protestants in New England". Its cosmopolitan origins are presumably the final and most compelling reason for its recommendation.

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## CATALINA

**PRESCOTT, Orville.** Literary critic. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, 1906. Co-editor of the *New York Times* "Books of the Times" since 1942. Lecturer on literary subjects since 1940. Fiction reviewer, *Yale Review*, since 1943. Author: *In My Opinion*, 1952.

**I**t has been a long time since Somerset Maugham has written a novel as good as *Catalina*, not since *Cakes and Ale*, which was published in 1930. *Catalina* is not nearly as good as that brilliant and maliciously amusing novel; but it is greatly superior to such flabby pot boilers as *Then and Now*, *The Hour Before the Dawn*, and *Up at the Villa*, and greatly superior also to the pretentious, machine-made mysticism of *The Razor's Edge*. *Catalina* is a gay and light-hearted romance which flirts mischievously with several serious subjects. It cannot be taken seriously and, I'm sure, was not intended to be so taken. But it is a sleekly clever book, a cynically and cold-bloodedly clever book. In the seventy-fifth year of his age Somerset Maugham still regards the human comedy as a diverting spectacle, a suitable target for impudent jests. The tragic elements in it he refuses to regard tragically; the farcial delight him.

After a long and spectacularly successful career as a playwright, short-story writer and novelist, Mr. Maugham turned in his declining years to the historical past and produced *Then and Now*, an unfortunately flat tale about Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia. In *Catalina* Mr. Maugham has continued to focus his mocking eye upon historical human aberrations, shifting from the deplorable conduct of a Borgia to the deplorable fanaticism of the Spanish Inquisition. His romance and his comedy take place against a backdrop of burning heretics.

This deft and completely unrealistic romance is many things at once: a fairy tale which follows faithfully a popular



and ancient formula; a moral parable in which sundry incontestable arguments in favour of tolerance, humility and loving kindness are presented; a fantasy in which miracles play a major role; not only miraculous cures through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, but providential little miracles designed to promote and protect chastity and to foster the honourable estate of holy matrimony. It is also a repository for numerous typical Maugham gems of cynical worldly wisdom.

In the reign of Philip III there lived in the city of Castel Rodriquez a poor but honest maiden who loved a handsome tailor's apprentice. Her name was Catalina and her life would have been unexceptionable if a bull had not broken loose and trampled on her leg, paralyzing it. Naturally Catalina's lover did not wish to marry a girl who could not work, so Catalina was immensely unhappy. She prayed for aid and in a vision the Virgin Mary said to her: "Go to the son of Juan Suarez de Valero who has best served God, and you will be cured".

Naturally Catalina went to Blasco de Valera, Bishop of Segovia, an Inquisitor of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, a man whose personal austerities and righteous zeal in combating heresy were well known. The Bishop, who had chastised so many sinners, thought that it was indeed he who was meant when he participated in a little miracle of his own, a feat of levitation before witnesses. His failure to perform a cure for her amused his brother, Don Manuel, a famous soldier who had slaughtered thousands of heretics in the service of his God and King. But Manuel failed, too. No one who has read the tales of the Brothers Grimm will be surprised by the success of the third brother, a humble baker, in curing the unfortunate girl.

But no previous experience with fairy tales can prepare readers of *Catalina* for what followed Catalina's cure, the contest between the lusty young woman, who wanted to get married, and Dona Beatriz, prioress of the Carmelite Convent, who wanted to make a nun of her and perhaps a saint.

Dona Beatriz, that efficient, haughty, scheming woman, is the object of some of Mr. Maugham's most malicious irony. The bishop, who was as sincerely religious as Dona Beatriz was not, comes in for his share of Mr. Maugham's ridicule, too. But it is ridicule touched by pity. The Bishop's belief may have brought suffering to others; but it was genuine and he suffered for it himself.

*Catalina*, which Mr. Maugham has written throughout with his tongue in his cheek, in a spirit of mock-heroic comedy, collapses into outright farce in its closing pages when Catalina becomes a successful actress and many times a mother, thus escaping the designs of Dona Beatriz, and when she meets a sorrowful knight not quite right in his head, a forlorn refugee from another and a more enduring comedy about human folly.

An example of the worldly wisdom of Somerset Maugham: "He had learned in his short life that a man should never excuse himself, and she, young though she was, knew that it is vain to reproach a man. However heinous his offences, it only irritates him to have them thrown in his teeth. A sensible woman is content to let them weigh on his conscience if he has one, and if he hasn't, recrimination is wasted".

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## C

### TELLER OF TALES

#### SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S SHORT STORIES

CORDELL, Richard A.

*See page 107*

Somerset Maugham is probably more widely known as a writer of short stories than as a dramatist or novelist, for his short stories, through the medium of the popular magazine, reach hundreds of thousands of readers who never attend the theatre and who seldom read a book. Moreover, the half dozen collections of his short stories have been widely read. He can afford to be amused by much of the criticism he has received as a writer of short stories. Many critics naturally enough are somewhat nonplussed by his enormous popularity, vaguely uncertain about the merits of a writer who has a large following among the *polloi*. He is also amused by English critics' frequent use of the adjective 'competent' in judging his stories, for it is used in a slightly disparaging sense. He is not sure why competence should be a fault, but he suspects that the vogue of short stories by Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, and their disciples has alienated a certain number of admirers of de Maupassant and his disciples.

More than half the stories have a setting in the Far East, with British colonials, natives, half-castes as characters. A multitude of readers know Somerset Maugham only as the author of these exotic tales. Desmond MacCarthy has pointed out that some literary reputations spread outward from a narrow circle of admirers, whereas others spread inward from a wide circumference of readers; that is, some authors and artists first impress the few and gradually achieve popular success, and then impress the intelligentsia. For the most part reputations such as Dickens', Charlie Chaplain's, Balzac's,

which spread inward from without, are more sure. Somerset Maugham belongs to that happy group whose books satisfy the discriminating few and please the many, and his reputation has spread inward. He first became widely celebrated for popular comedies, then years later for exotic stories of the East. Sound, critical appreciation of masterpieces such as *The Circle* and *Of Human Bondage* formed more slowly, but it has grown steadily with the passing years.

De Maupassant set the vogue in short stories for the abrupt surprise ending. In France and the United States the 'trick' story, the story of incident with an unanticipated *dénouement*, has attained a high mechanical and technical skill. Most of Somerset Maugham's stories are of the same type, except that he often substitutes a surprising ethical point of view for the unexpected final incident. Nothing fascinates Somerset Maugham so much as human behaviour, particularly the aberrations of seemingly normal people. He can make an unconventional ethic, a defence of exceptional conduct, or a denunciation of plausible conduct as exciting as violent melodrama. At the same time his stories remain stories of incident, not tortuous studies in psychoanalysis. He sketches the scene and characters broadly but adequately, the story is told, the unaccountability of human nature illustrated, a character interprets, or comments upon, the behaviour of the protagonist. A typical story is *Footprints in the Jungle*. The author while travelling in Malaya is a guest of a police commissioner in Tanah Merah. The two engage in a bridge game at the club with Cartwright, a planter, and his wife. Later the policeman tells the story of the Cartwrights. Many years before, young Cartwright had lived in the home of the Bronsons. One evening Bronson was found murdered and robbed. A year later Cartwright married his widow. Then the policeman discovered evidence which proved beyond a doubt in his own mind that Cartwright had murdered Bronson at Mrs. Bronson's instigation. They were desperately in love, and callously had put the husband out of the way; however, the

evidence was not of a character to impress a jury, and the policeman kept quiet. "I held my tongue and the Bronson murder was forgotten".

"I don't suppose the Cartwrights have forgotten", I suggested.

"I shouldn't be surprised. Human memory is astonishingly short, and if you want my professional opinion, I don't mind telling you that I don't believe remorse for a crime ever sits very heavily on a man when he's absolutely sure he'll never be found out . . . They are very nice people; they're about the pleasantest people here. Mrs. Cartwright is a thoroughly good sort and a very amusing woman . . .". No violent catastrophe could shock more than this casual denial of what has been almost universally accepted as a truth. Two people commit a dastardly crime, the poisoned chalice does not return to their own lips, and after a time they lead a normal, fairly happy life.

Throughout the short stories is the same pervasive irony that sharpens the plays and novels. Were Somerset Maugham not so expert a *raconteur*, his iconoclasm and anti-romanticism would repel the average reader, who, however brave he may be in everyday life, is notably lacking in courage in his reading. He likes wish-fulfilment fiction, optimism, poetic justice, romance, little of which he finds in the stories of Somerset Maugham. The average reader may deplore what he considers cynicism but he finds the stories readable enough to triumph over the warmwood. In *The Back of Beyond* a character is accused of cynicism and replies: "I haven't deeply considered the matter, but if to look truth in the face and not resent it when it's unpalatable, and take human nature as you find it, smiling when it's absurd and grieved without exaggeration when it's pitiful, is to be cynical, then I suppose I'm a cynic. Mostly human nature is both absurd and pitiful, but if life has taught you tolerance you find in it more to smile at than to weep". This is, of course, the author speaking. Perhaps it is his tolerance which has

## SOMERSET MAUGHAM

helped create the bogey of his cynicism, his refusal to be outraged by human nature at its worst. The average man is suspicious of tolerance and agrees with Claude Bernard: "Il ne suffit pas de rester spectateur inerte du bien ou du mal. Il faut faire naître l'un et le développer, lutter avec l'autre pour extirper et détruire". But Somerset Maugham is not actively concerned over other people's conduct, over good and evil. He is content to be an observer and to report; often to try to explain behaviour, rarely to judge it.

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## THE TREMBLING OF A LEAF

CORDELL, Richard A.

U ntil the World War, Somerset Maugham's chief interest was in the drama, and he wrote no more short stories for nearly twenty years. It was not until his war-time journey to the South Seas furnished him with themes which he thought more suitable for the brief narrative than for the novel or drama that he resumed short story writing. "It was as a beginner of over forty that I wrote the story that is now called *Rain*".

His stories, practically all of which were first published in magazines, he wrote primarily as a relief from other work which was growing irksome. By the time of the war he could afford to write for his own satisfaction. On his journeys he took notes on what he observed and listened to other men's stories; four years later he wrote *Rain*. This most celebrated of modern English short stories was refused by half a dozen magazines in spite of the author's eminence. Subsequent stories suffered a similar fate. When he had written six, he published them under the title *The Trembling of a Leaf*. The title is from Sainte-Beuve: "L'extrême félicité, à-peine séparée par une feuille tremblante de l'extrême désespoir, n'est-ce pas la vie?" The characters are Europeans in the South Seas, in an alien environment to which they adjust themselves with difficulty and often with some sacrifice of balance and tranquillity. The title suggests that they are of an unsettled nature, equally susceptible to ecstatic happiness or extreme despair — which are separated only by the trembling of a leaf. The book made Somerset Maugham's fame as a writer of short stories as great as his fame as a dramatist and as a novelist.

The book begins with a brief invocation to the Pacific written in a rhythmic prose suggestive of the swell of the ocean; it is perilously near what the author contemptuously

calls 'detestable stuff' — a prose poem. The first story is *Mackintosh*, a powerful psychological study of an island administrator and his assistant; they are completely unlike in temperament, tastes, education, ethics. The administrator, Walker, Pickwickian in appearance, is gross, sensual, hearty, thick-skinned, boorish, and unscrupulous; but in his crude way he is competent on the island. His assistant, Mackintosh, gaunt and ascetic, is scholarly, tidy, refined, educated. He grows to loathe his vulgar superior, who never suspects that he is the object of hate, and who drives Mackintosh to exasperation with his revolting crudeness. Walker becomes engaged in an altercation with some native labourers. One of them takes a revolver which Mackintosh had purposely left available, murders Walker, and then replaces the weapon. Mackintosh is thereupon seized by an agonizing remorse, and kills himself. Although he is not actually guilty of murder, his puritan conscience does not relax even in this land of easy morals, and he finds life intolerable. There is a fierce irony in the catastrophe — Mackintosh is driven to self-destruction because of the death of the man whom he hated savagely. The story is completely objective: both men are presented fairly, and we feel pity and horror for both. Those readers who demand poetic justice in fiction will relish *Mackintosh*, which is a completely moral story.

The most cheerful story in *The Trembling of a Leaf* is *The Fall of Edward Barnard*. It, too, is a study of environment, but the effects are not disastrous. The author's attitude is far from objective, and we are justified in surmising that his own views are expressed by Edward. Edward Barnard is sent to the South Seas on a business mission, succumbs to its spell, and renounces his American fiancée, a successful future, and the various amenities of civilized existence in Chicago. He remains in Papeete, shorn of ambition but happy. He maintains that he has lost the whole world but has secured his soul. His good friend who comes to take him back to America is the personification of success and



decorum. He is shocked by the languid, torpid life on the island, and a bit nettled that wants can be satisfied with so little expenditure of energy. He attempts to persuade Edward to return to America, and in their debate the author obviously states sympathetically the views of Edward, whereas his friend (in high, stiff collar) is a caricature of civilized man. There are beautiful bits of description, and a certain amount of suspense in the delayed expression of Edward's stand. Few can read *The Fall of Edward Barnard* without craving to set sail for the South Seas.

Somerset Maugham proves himself a shrewd judge of his own work when he selects *Red* as his best story. Its technique is flawless, and it conforms to the author's definition of a short story. Every detail serves to make the final irony more shattering, unity of time is secured through a clever and plausible revelation in dialogue of antecedent events. The story begins with a rapturous idyll, an account of a great and beautiful love of a white sailor and a native girl. Both are of extraordinary beauty. One day Red, the young lover, disappears and the girl is inconsolable. After some years she is persuaded to marry another white man, but her worship of Red does not abate. When she is old and fat, Red accidentally meets her and her husband. Red is obese, bald, and vulgar. She does not recognize him, but her husband does. "Was that the man who had prevented him from being happy? Was that the man whom Sally had loved all these years and for whom she had waited so desperately? It was grotesque . . . He had been cheated. They had seen each other at last and had not known it . . . The gods had played him a trick and he was old now. . . . He wondered what she would say if he told her now that the fat old man sitting in the chair was the lover whom she remembered still with the passionate abandonment of her youth". No more cruel story has ever been written. Paola and Francesca, and Romeo and Juliet die in love and beauty; but Red and Sally live to be obscene in appearance and shabby of soul. One familiar with

the author's works might suspect that he makes the beginning lovely and idyllic merely to intensify the bitterness of the end. *Red* is the most haunting and tragic of Somerset Maugham's stories. If the style were more austere, a little less rich and elegant, it might well pass as a story of de Maupassant.

*The Pool* is likewise tragic, but not so moving as *Red*. It is a sordid story of the degeneration of a Scotsman who, ignorant of native psychology, naively trusting in the saw that human nature is the same the world over, marries a beautiful native girl and treats her as a white man would treat a white woman. The marriage fails, but his infatuation survives. Miserable and jealous, and almost constantly drunk, he sinks under public scorn and self-loathing, and commits suicide.

Although *The Pool* lacks the ironic force of *Red*, irony is not missing: if the hero had been less decent and taken the native girl as a mistress, the tragedy might have been averted. European notions of honour are sometimes disastrous at home (as in *A Man of Honour*), but they must be practised with even more wariness in the East. The story is not without elements of beauty and poetry; especially exquisite are the descriptions of the pool, which becomes a half mysterious symbol. If *The Fall of Edward Barnard* is capable of luring Europeans to the South Seas, *The Pool* is equally capable of discouraging their emigration.

*Honolulu* is a story of unexplained animal magnetism, common in the East and in various forms not unknown in Ireland and other parts of Europe. A ship's captain is put under a voodoo spell by a native enemy and escapes his fate only when the native is killed. It is a fantastic yarn, but the fact that the character to whom the story is told is sceptical of its genuineness permits the reader to regard it merely as a piece of folk-lore.

*Rain*, Somerset Maugham's best-known story, had its beginning in a brief entry in the author's notebook. While

travelling from Honolulu to Pago-Pago, he jotted down impressions of passengers who attracted his attention. Of Miss Thompson he wrote: "Plump, pretty in a coarse fashion, perhaps not more than twenty-seven. She wore a white dress and a large white hat, long white boots from which the calves bulged in cotton stockings". Of the missionary he wrote, "He was a tall, thin man, with long limbs loosely jointed . . . hollow cheeks, and high cheek-bones, his fine large dark eyes were deep in their sockets, he had full, sensual lips, he wore his hair rather long. He had a cadaverous air and a look of suppressed fire". He also made an extended description of the missionary's wife. He talked once with the missionary and his wife, but not at all with Miss Thompson. He then made a rough draft of the story.

*Rain* (originally called *Miss Thompson*) is a masterpiece which the tense but melodramatic stage version, the moving picture vulgarizations, and the rather lurid advertising have not damaged. Much of its power comes from its restraint. The missionary is not merely a narrow-minded fanatic: he is courageous and sincere. Sadie is not sentimentalized; she is friendly and generous, but nauseatingly gross. Dr. McPhail, the raisonneur and chorus of good sense, is ineffectual, and the thin piping of his rationalism is all but unheard amid the blasts of Davidson's fanaticism. The maddening effect of persistent rain is cleverly suggested by a minimum of weather talk. The Freudian undertones of the tragedy are heard plainly only once — in the "hills of Nebraska" dream. Practically none of the strenuous conversations between Sadie and the minister are reported; the most dramatic scenes in the story, Davidson's attempts to make love to the prostitute and his suicide, are not described at all. The ending is swift; Sadie's last line reveals the whole truth. The qualities of *Rain*, however, are not all negative. The characters are sharply delineated; Pago-Pago is unforgettably painted; the everlasting rain at first slightly depresses the reader, but its effect is cumulative and becomes almost distracting. The

**SOMERSET MAUGHAM**

story, taut in construction and simply told, is bold and exciting. The implications of unhealthy ascetism and sex-repression make *Rain* a notable pioneer in Freudian fiction.

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## AN AUTHOR IN EVENING DRESS

### FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

SYKES, Gerald. Author and critic. Born in Ontario, Canada, 1903. After a diversified career in films, the theatre, business and diplomacy, he is now devoting himself exclusively to writing. Contributions to *Hound and Horn*, *The American Caravan*, *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *Twice A Year*, *Tomorrow*, *The Reporter*, and many other publications. Author of two novels: *The Nice American*, 1950, and *The Center of the Stage* (1952).

**T**he question is sometimes asked, Why should the man who wrote *Of Human Bondage* now write trash? It is indisputable that Mr. Maugham, despite the authorship of one novel of almost universal appeal, ceased some time ago to be a force and was bought, as it were, for the stable of W. R. Hearst. In fact, so vivid has been his conversion to Mammon that we imagine him now as most of the time in evening dress, the perfect picture of a fashionable novelist, carnation always in lapel; so that quite naturally he takes his place among the glittering passengers in the grand saloon of that quadruple-screw ship which bore *The Gentleman from San Francisco* across the ocean, that ship which symbolized, in Bunin's short story, the meaningless great world that is to be destroyed — modern Babylon.

And as a matter of fact, in these *Six Stories Written in the First Person Singular*, where Mr. Maugham appears in the background as 'I' and 'the novelist', most of the time he is in evening dress. Our curiosity is aroused; we cannot help reading the book, whether or not the actions of its principal characters are imaginary, for what it reveals by the way of the personal life of its author. And why not? Why stop on the frontier of flimsy artifice when the real world lies beyond? Why be content with 'Mortimer Ellis', with 'Mrs. Albert Forrester', with 'Ferdy Rabenstein', those slapdash, paper-

deep fictions, when W. Somerset Maugham, the living novelist, lies within our reach? We have a chance here to examine one of the most interesting passengers aboard that symbolic liner, one of the distinctive modern types — a popular author, celebrated for long runs and best-sellers.

We observe a man of middle years and middle-class parentage who has made a place for himself in the world against what seem to have been unusually heavy odds. He is married, he says, but whenever seen he is alone. He is received into many classes of society, including the aristocracy. His warmest eloquence is shown over a lamb-cutlet. There is no pressing labour that fills his life; time, in fact, hangs heavy on his hands. Being bored, he seeks diversion at swell restaurants, at hotels, at parties, and picks up, naturally, a kind of *savoir-faire*. Not a real *savoir-faire*, however, any more than the swell world in which he moves is really swell, the aristocrats really aristocrats, the friends really friends. The truth is that he is far too timid, too thin-skinned to be a man of the world; the 'high-life' that he frequents is no more than a greater night club with its cash register concealed; the aristocrats are pushing, shaky vulgarians; and the friends detest one another. It is a world of pseudo-pleasure, of pseudo-gentility, and genuine dislike.

Now let us look at the stories. The fortune of a manufacturer, as we know, often rests upon exploitation, sharp practice, juggled stocks, adulteration. Upon what rests the fortune of a popular author? We must recall that he is obliged to meet the requirements of women who will read the advertisement next to his story and will buy a pore cleanser because some needy heiress has signed her name to the prepared indorsement. We must not be surprised if he drives home his innuendoes with a hammer, if he employs a 'brilliance' that would dazzle no one but a housewife, if his work as a whole bears the same resemblance to its pretensions as troops on the musical-comedy stage bear to real soldiers. These are stories of the middle-aged married woman

who ruined both her own life and her husband's because she did *not* commit adultery; of the comic-strip bigamist who needed one more wife to make it a 'round dozen'; of the duke's daughter who slept on the sly with a footman; of the unattractive spinster who by a change of clothes, coiffure, and audience was transformed into a famous beauty and wit; of the reversion to type of a family of Jewish nobility; of the highbrow authoress whose henpecked husband eloped with a cook and inspired her to write a best-seller. Mr. Maugham, showing signs of his experience in the theatre, has 'pointed' his stories with an uncanny sense of his audience. There can be few clichés to incrust his six subjects that he has overlooked.

Anyone who glances below the surface will see that however jauntily he tips on his topper and sets off for Cairo, at heart he is very unhappy. And what else could be expected of a writer of his gifts, the green-hued Mildred's creator, when he has been brought to the point of declaring resignedly in his preface that "the average life of a novel is ninety days". The tragedy of Somerset Maugham is in that apparently bland cynicism. Ninety days! What an incentive to good workmanship, to care, to creation! No writer can put his heart into a book that is going to be thrown away. And no one — no, not even the manufacturer — is happy in producing shoddy goods.

There is despair then in the heart of the impressive figure in the grand saloon. It is a tortured smile on the face of the distinguished author as he inwardly waits — for what?

What metamorphosis took place? What happened to the man who wrote *Of Human Bondage*? Were his desires worldly from the start; was he fired originally with no artist's longing to see and make, but with an earthling's lust to dine well and glitter? Or was a man of genius, a virgin heart, seduced by the great world of riches and power?

"Woe to thee, Babylon, that mighty city!"

## ANGRY AUTHOR'S COMPLAINT

### EAST AND WEST

COWLEY, Malcolm. Author, critic, editor. Born in Belsano, Pa., 1898. Associate editor of *The New Republic*, 1929-1944. Member of P.E.N. Club. Translated from the French several books by Paul Valéry, Maurice Barrès, and André Gide. Author: *Blue Juniata*, 1929; *Exile's Return: A Narrative of Ideas*, 1934; *Books That Changed Our Minds*, 1939; *The Portable Hemingway*, 1944; *The Portable Faulkner*, 1946; *The Portable Hawthorne*, 1948; *The Complete Whitman*, 1948; *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, 1950.

**W** Somerset Maugham is utterly tired of being told that he is a 'competent' story teller. He feels that the word is used superciliously. It gets under his skin like a chigger, itches and keeps him from sleeping, fills him with blind resentment against all the critics who apply it to his work. Nor does his resentment stop with them. He hates the lucky writers they praise, he hates the magazines that print their book reviews, he even hates people who read these magazines. I am not in the least exaggerating: every time one of Maugham's characters is seen with a copy of *The London Mercury* or *The New Statesman and Nation*, you can be quite sure that he will end by revealing himself as an unspeakable bounder. Years ago, when he wrote *Of Human Bondage*, Maugham was praised by the highbrow critics of whom he now complains. He is like a boy who used to win prizes in school, and he feels he is doing just as good work as ever, and wonders resentfully why he is given only a passing grade.

There is evidently something [he says] that a number of people do not like in my stories and it is this they try to express when they damn them with the faint praise of competence. I have a notion that it is the definiteness of



their form . . . If I am right in this surmise I can do nothing about it and I must resign myself to being called competent for the rest of my days. My prepossessions are on the side of law and order. I like a story that fits.

I am quoting from his preface to *East and West*, a big book into which he has gathered his thirty favourite stories, arranged chronologically. *Rain*, originally published as *Miss Thompson*, is the first, and Maugham tells us that it was written in 1919, at a time when he had already earned a considerable reputation as a playwright. The stage taught him, so he says, "to leave out everything that did not serve the dramatic value of my story. It taught me to make incident follow incident in such manner as to lead up to the climax I had in mind". But it did not teach him all of the story teller's art. His first efforts in the new form were theatrical, in the bad sense, and even though *Rain* is better than the others, it does not stand rereading; for once we know that the harlot is going to triumph over the missionary, we lose interest in both of them; they are wax figures without life of their own. Making people live in short stories is a different problem from making them live on the stage, and Maugham took three or four years to solve it.

One has vastly more respect for his recent work after reading the early stories in which he fumbled with human motives and tried to impress his audience by giving them surprise endings in the O. Henry manner (see *Red* and *Honolulu*) and bucketsful of South Seas atmosphere sloshed on like whitewash. He doesn't have to use tricks today; he is easy, natural, convincing, and is quite possibly, the best plain storyteller writing in English. Of course, his method of narration has disadvantages which Maugham is ready to acknowledge. "It gives a tightness of effect that is sometimes disconcerting . . . Sometimes it gives you a sensation of airlessness when you see persons who behave so exactly according to character, and incidents that fall into place with such perfect convenience". This may indeed be the reason

why many critics call his work 'competent' with an implied sneer, but I suspect that there is another reason, too, which Maugham doesn't mention.

This other reason has nothing to do with his manner of handling plots. It bears some relation to his subject matter, but only indirectly. For the most part Maugham writes about Englishmen of the upper middle class, particularly those who carry the burden of empire in Borneo and the Malay States. They are, if we can trust his description, people as dull and narrow as one could imagine meeting at the edge of the jungle, but he likes to ferret out the moments of sudden drama in their lives. "I'm afraid you'll think it awfully strange of me to talk like this", one of them says. "I'm at the end of my tether. If I don't talk to somebody I shall go off my head". And so he talks — they all talk, they tell of living with native girls, committing or condoning murders, and the author listens — "I held my breath", he says, "for to me there is nothing more awe-inspiring than when a man discovers to you the nakedness of his soul". The souls they reveal are mostly unbeautiful and suburban, but the women are at least more vivid than the men, and a few of them are creatures splendid in their fury. They lie, they deceive their husbands (and perhaps cut their throats with a Malay parang), they commit incest, they empty revolvers into their lovers, and they do everything with an admirable lack of moral compunction. They are fine, sullen animals, like some of the women portrayed by Racine — and there is reason for mentioning his name, since Maugham has studied him to advantage and has managed to recapture in some of these stories (especially *The Book-Bag*) the effortless strength of a Racinian tragedy. But all this doesn't explain the quality we are seeking. Racine was a craftsman still more careful and economical than Maugham, yet he has not often been attacked on the grounds of competence.

No, there is something else in this book that ends by making some of its readers impatient and angry with the

author, even though they started with the friendliest feelings. It is a quality hard to define, one that belongs, I think, to the moral background. Reading these thirty stories one after another is like sitting for a long time in a room where people are playing bridge and gossiping in even voices. The room may be east or west, in London or Singapore, but the people in it are always the same: they are the Britons of good family who administer the Empire under the direction of its actual rulers. They know what is done and what is not done. They know, it has never entered their mind to question, that a wise Providence has ordered them to bathe every morning, play tennis every afternoon, travel first-class on steamers and transform a corner of the jungle into something that might be mistaken at first glance for an English suburb. They cannot imagine a state of society in which they, the pukka sahibs, would no longer be called upon to rule the inferior races firmly but with a proper benevolence.

Here Maugham is at home . . . It would be wrong to pick a quarrel with him for writing about these people, since an author is wise to select the subjects that he knows best. But it is a little shocking to find that he shares their prejudices against rebels and intellectuals and people who travel second class or have a dash of native blood in them. He wasn't like that originally, not if I remember *Of Human Bondage*. It is still worse, however, to find that after living among these people and becoming one of them in spirit, a self-made philistine, he really doesn't like them. He has no sympathy for his characters, but only tolerance mingled with easy cynicism. His stories are full of wise saws, of the sort that are spoken by old broken men in chimney corners. "It is strange that men, inhabitants for so short a while of an alien and inhuman world, should go out of their way to cause themselves so much unhappiness". Well, it is strange, isn't it? "Mostly human nature is both absurd and pitiful, but if life has taught you tolerance you find in it more to smile at than to weep". Well, you might get angry for a change; and perhaps you might

find that remarks like this are the best clue to the quality that makes Maugham's stories disliked by so many readers. If he insists on being patronizing, smugly and insultingly tolerant toward humankind in general, he can scarcely complain because the critics are supercilious toward a single member of that absurd and pitiful race.

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## THE MIXTURE AS BEFORE

PRITCHETT, Victor Sawdon. British editor and critic. Born 1900. Literary editor of the *New Statesman and Nation*, also broadcaster, film script writer and lecturer. Member P.E.N. Club. Among his books are *The Spanish Virgin*, 1930; *You Make Your Own Life*, 1938; *The Living Novel*, 1946; *Mr. Beluncle*, 1951.

Society lags behind its writers and takes sometimes a generation to catch up with them. It is a fact, for example, that although two wars stand between us and everything Mr. Maugham has to say, he is established as one of the most distinguished and most readable of the older writers. Accomplishment has always been sneered at in English letters and readability has become a sneer too; yet these two qualities, cultivated with an unequalled scrupulousness by Mr. Maugham, have at least made their impression. By them and by the combination of bitterness and tolerance (or, in his lower manner, cynicism and *laissez faire*), he has managed to convince an enormous public which has grown more and more embittered, disillusioned, tolerant and even frivolous, that he is their man, the tailor's mirror of the moment. And, since society lags, so to a great extent, he is. He has also had luck. The last forty years of the English novel have seen an enormous and optimistic social preoccupation, a cheerful, complacent or sensitive dismembering of tabus which released the individual. The present war has, on the short view, dashed all that and Maugham, the sceptic, who would have nothing to do with it all either in politics or belief, survives among the wreckage of public Utopias and private sensibilities. At least, one of the two Maughams survives; the other, in dinner jacket and holding the Ritz cocktail, looks rather tawdry, like that *crème de menthe* spattered dress suit at the surrealist exhibition.

Novelists have a multiple personality in their work and a

dual personality in their profession. In the latter they divide simply into God and Mammon. Maugham begins as the austere, impersonal, sceptical, and even pitying God, walking among men and women, and watching them sedulously creating their misery and illusions. Tired of walking, he takes a seat at the café and, comfortable, finds scepticism become cynicism, austerity become chic, pity becoming the indulgence of the man of the world, morality a trick. He plays Iago to humanity's bellowing Othello and, disdaining disorderliness and anarchy, as Iago did, he creates an imaginary human being, an efficient, orderly, removed and sensible one, who has put money in his purse and has learned to live in a world of illusion without illusions. Iago, after all, was a very civilized man, cruel no doubt and probably frustrated, but a great deal pleasanter to live with than the rhetorical Moor.

Writers do not commonly add anything new to the ideas which dominated them in their twenties. The Maugham strain can be found in his contemporaries - - Shaw, Kipling, and Galsworthy - in the former two particularly. Writers were reacting to the new financiers' British Empire, the gentleman myth, the æstheticism of the decade, and all attacking sexual tabus and convention. To the modern reader the words 'gentleman' and 'convention' seem an obsession in Maugham and Shaw; Shaw is all for tearing up the Empire, Kipling for expanding it until it becomes mystical; Maugham succeeds him as the debunker of the white man's burden which usually turns out to be his wife's adultery. Maugham is Kipling, turned inside out, discovering alcohol, beach-combing and middle-class sex, where Kipling portrayed the Roman overlord and evoked the secret, savage hierarchy of the jungle. The jungle is not usually savage in Maugham; it is, strangely enough, something pictorially extravagant which surrounds the judicious æsthete. People go to pieces in the Maugham jungle and, living happily as wreckage, disconcert the conventional; they do not, as in Kipling, discover the masonic ritualism of the animals. Of the two writers it is

hard to say who is the more romantic, the more masochistic, the more knowing. Kipling's saving quality was his cunning. Maugham's his common sense; both have an embarrassment before emotion, a gnawing sense of imminent evil.

But really Maugham has more in common with Shaw. He has the Shaw trick of turning things upside down, but it is a trick which does not come into its own until Maugham begins to write short stories. The form invites that artifice. You wrote a story about a gentleman and showed he was a cad, you divulged the acidity in what 'the world' calls virtue and the humanity in what it calls vice. Good women turn out to be bitches; if you redeem the prostitute it is because you lust after her. (*Rain*). This topsy-turvy became fantasy in Shaw; but Maugham's imagination is defective there. He is unexitable. Shaw drunk might sing sentimentally *The Harp that Once on Tard's Walls*; Maugham, one feels, would choose the more moderate langours of *The Lily of Laguna*. What begins as an attack on convention in Maugham, and especially on the lady and gentleman convention, spreads and deepens into a general philosophy of life (at first dramatic and finally tolerant and ironical) that everything turns into its opposite. People are destroyed by their virtues as well as by their vices.

Take the new collection of stories, *The Mixture as Before* (said, one hopes mistakenly, to be his last). The theory is illustrated frivolously in the tale of how three fat women living on a starvation diet at Antibes, decide to guzzle once more when a thin woman whom they grow to hate, comes along and crams down as much as she can hold without fear for her figure. The gentleman preoccupation; an actor palms himself off as a sahib and, after he is exposed, behaves with the fantastic gallantry of the sahib magazines; a lie has turned into truth. The moral question: a murderer is supposed to suffer pangs of conscience, but here is a murderer who has no pangs but actually was driven to a wicked crime by his conscience. The æsthetic question; the 'nineties' great

preoccupation with the artist as the social antithesis of the gentleman — this is the theme of many Maugham novels and stories, *Theatre*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, etc., is illustrated by the vulgar horror of a great singer's life contrasted with the sublimity of her art. The problem of happiness: the happiest man in the French convict settlement is one who has just been made executioner; preparing for his first execution, he enjoys the scenery like an honest man properly content with the world, unaware that he is about to be murdered. This story, *An Official Position*, and another, *The Facts of Life*, are Maugham at his best. The last is brilliant comedy of extraordinary ingenuity and narrative skill.

Mr. Maugham has often written about the position of the artist but has obviously his period's stress on the pure artist. This may be all right for painters and musicians, but for novelists it is dubious doctrine. Maugham's own common sense has rejected the cultural snobbery of the art hounds and, without discarding a belief in the isolation of writers he has nevertheless had the wisdom to recognise that he is a moralist who works, as moralists must, within their limits. At least, he is drawn now towards the middle-class clubman's common sense; and now towards a monklike asceticism. He is the unshockable and the detached. Yet there are no detached people. If detachment means attachment to the search for truth, one cannot say Mr. Maugham is altogether attached to this search. In two-thirds of *Of Human Bondage* perhaps; but not in the stories. He is attached there to his pattern which is what remains for him of that early addiction to 'art for art's sake', which he confessed to and disapproved of in *The Summing Up*. And pattern is the trick. For this reason a brilliant piece of macabre narrative like the executioner's story has the enormous readability, the exact, lucid if slightly perfunctory prose, of the best Maugham manner, and carries one to the most savage height of irony, yet makes no profound impression at all. A moralist, he has displayed not a curious and horrifying fragment of life, but an argu-



ment. On the other hand, a purely artificial story like *The Facts of Life* in which a young man goes to Paris and, heedless of his father's warnings of the awful consequences, gambles, lends money to a stranger and picks up a woman, and comes back having committed all these follies without damage, indeed having made 6,000 francs on the deal, produces a lasting impression on the reader. It has not merely exposed the fatal weakness of the moralist position; it is perfect artificial comedy without pretending to be otherwise.

There is another sense in which the Maugham detachment is skin deep. His scepticism has the virtues of pity, tolerance, humanity, an eye for humbug and a love of the diversity of human nature. But his real attachment is to his class. Where his contemporaries became sociologists and prophets; or, uneasy in their class and unanchored, tossed about like pretty boats in the harbours of their own private sensibilities, Maugham, insisting on a writer's duty, assumed the stability and immortality of the world he lived in. Hence the capacity to see an unruly world at one remove, the dapper and detached figure in the Ritz bar. (He knows, as his last novel, *Christmas Holiday*, showed, the bar may get a bomb in it, but it was characteristic that he sought to teach a modern young hero a lesson by the pure Symonds-Wilde device of making him spend a *nuit blanche* with a prostitute vicariously expiating sin. Oh 1890!) We feel today the need of being more direct, less reflective in narrative because it is impossible to keep the world at one remove from the middle classes any more.

Two novels of Maugham's stand out, one by God and the other by Mammon. *Of Human Bondage* did for its time what is more popular in French literature than in English owing to our fear of priggishness: the honest portrait of a young man. Thackeray had tried it in *Pendennis* – a novel which ought to be re-read. Maugham does not in the least mind admitting the two great English shames: snobishness and priggishness. Mammon blossomed perfectly in the classic

merriment of *Cakes and Ale*. These books, like all of Maugham's — this is due to his devotion to technique — improve on re-reading. He has always kept his head; in *Cakes and Ale* he kept his heart. The sentimentality of the man whose mask of disappointment has become second nature does not show here. Iago has ceased to moralise. He seems to have felt; and yet to have retained his wits.

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## D

### THE ESSAYIST AND AUTHOR OF TRAVEL BOOKS

#### MAUGHAM'S CHINESE SKETCHES

FIELD, Louise Maunsell. Author of novels, book reviews and articles. Born in New York. Contributed book reviews for the *New York Times Book Review*, the *New York Sun*, the *New York Evening Post*, the *Bookman*; articles for *Woman's Home Companion*, *Reader's Digest*, *Scribner's Magazine*, the *Bookman*, the *North American Review*, and other periodicals.

A traveller's notebook, filled with thumbnail sketches of persons and places and points of view, *On a Chinese Screen* has a distinctly tantalizing quality. So many of these jottings might be expanded into fascinating stories — stories of the kind Mr. W. Somerset Maugham does so particularly well. What could not the man who wrote *Rain* do with, for instance, the material suggested by the brief sketch *Fear*? That short sketch — short, though it is one of the longest in the book — gives a glimpse into the tormented soul of the missionary who for days and months and years had forced himself to maintain a benevolent, sympathetic attitude toward what he hated, martyring himself "with a passionate exasperation". Inevitably the time must have come when the strain proved too great, when something snapped; and then — what then? Mr. Maugham could tell us completely, so admirably, if he only wanted! And then there is that other suggested story, the story of Doctor Macallister, what he had been, and how he came to be what he was, which Mr. Maugham admits he would "like to write", while the reader ardently hopes that he will eventually yield to his desire.

Of the fifty-eight short papers contained in the book, there are many which suggest stories, while others are concerned

with moods and impressions. Vividly we see the long line of blue-clad coolies, human beasts of burden, picturesque and terribly pitiable. For, "beating heart or angry sore, bitter rain or burning sun notwithstanding, they go on eternally, from dawn till dusk, year in year out, from childhood to the extreme of old age", hopeless, enduring. But the coolies are only one among the many sights of "The Road" along which we accompany Mr. Maugham, pausing now and then to rest at "The Inn", to listen to "The Song of the River", to see "The Sights of the Town" or to discuss the close relationship between "Democracy" and smells. For, declares Mr. Maugham, "the matutinal tub divides the classes more effectually than birth, wealth or education . . .". The invention of the 'sanitary convenience' has destroyed the sense of equality in men "of the West, which still exists among the Chinese, whose nostrils are not sensitive". But for the most part he is interested more in people than in places or theories, and this notebook contains impressions of men and women, of all sorts and kinds, from the Chinese philosopher whose verses, when translated, proved to be of such a totally unexpected type, to the missionary and reformer who was cruel as only reformers can be. Mrs. Fanning, "that little grotesque ugly woman", who by means of the "passion of love" which was in her had accomplished what might well have been regarded as an almost impossible task, and the "Missionary Lady" whose conversation was truly 'devastating' bear small relation to each other.

Yet there is a link which joins together the many men and women appearing in these pages, since they are all shown as they seem in their connection with China. Semi-occasionally, that relation is sympathetic; far more often it is one of gross ignorance and self-satisfaction. The good-natured, well-meaning "Seventh-Day Adventist", who was so completely ignorant of the history, art and letters of China, had plenty of company in his belief that the Chinese must be abysmally ignorant "because they did not know the same things he

did". The commercial men who have spent the better parts of their lives in China without ever learning more than half a dozen words of Chinese are more narrow than the groups of important persons gathered at dinner parties in the "Legation Quarter" or "At a Tea Port". The impression of hardness, narrowness, self-satisfied lack of understanding among the whites — an impression occasionally relieved by a gleam of such spiritual beauty as that of "The Nun" or courage like that of "His Britannic Majesty's Representative" who unhesitatingly "stepped forward between the levelled rifles and the three miserable men and told the soldiers to shoot and be damned" — becomes more and more pronounced with almost each page one turns; yet Mr. Maugham holds no belief for the Chinese.

It is a fascinating volume, this new book of Mr. Maugham's, vivid, thoughtful, full of colour, picturesque, stimulating to the imagination. By means of it one feels that one is coming into contact with an unusually interesting mind, keenly intelligent, sensitive and sympathetic, quick to perceive and to understand. There is so much in it upon which one would like to comment — choice is all but impossible.

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## SPANISH GOLD

### DON FERNANDO

GREENE, Graham. Author and publisher. Born in 1904. On staff of *The Times*, 1926-1930. Literary Editor, *The Spectator*, 1940-1941. Author: *The Man Within*, 1929; *Rumour at Nightfall*, 1931; *England Made Me*, 1935; *The Basement Room*, *A Mexican Journey*, 1939; *British Dramatists*, 1942; *The Ministry of Fear*, 1943; *The Heart of the Matter*, 1948.

"A writer", Mr. Maugham declares in these variations on some Spanish themes, "is not made by one book, but by a body of work. It will not be of equal value; his books will be tentative while he is learning the technique and developing his powers; and if, as most writers do, for it is a healthy occupation, he lives too long, his later work will show the decline due to advancing years; but there will be a period during which he will bring forth what he had in him to bring forth in the perfection of which he is capable". To this last-mentioned period *Don Fernando* belongs; it is Mr. Maugham's best book.

It will be an unexpected book for those to whom Mr. Maugham still primarily means: adultery in China, murder in Malaya, suicide in the South Seas, the coloured violent stories which have so appreciably raised the level of the popular magazine. But there is a more important Mr. Maugham than that: the shrewd, critical, humane observer of *Cakes and Ale*, of the best Ashenden stories, of the preface to the collected tales. The characteristic most evident in these books and in *Don Fernando* is honesty. It has emerged slowly out of the cynical and romantic past; there are passages in *The Trembling of a Leaf* and *The Painted Veil* which Mr. Maugham must find acutely embarrassing to remember, and it is interesting to learn in *Don Fernando* that Mr. Maugham's extensive knowledge of Spanish litera-

ture was accumulated when he was young, to provide him with material for a romantic Juanesque novel which he never wrote. Instead of Don Juan then we have Don Fernando, the innkeeper and curio dealer who forced Mr. Maugham unwillingly to buy an old life of Ignatius Loyola, and it is with this life that his study of old Spain starts.

I have never read a book with more excitement and amusement. The contrast is peculiarly piquant between the opulence of the material (the fierce asceticisms of Loyola and St. Peter of Alcantara, the conceits of Lope de Vega, the ribaldry of the picaresque novelists, the food and the architecture and the painters of Spain, the grim, bright goaty land) and Mr. Maugham's honest unenthusiastic mind. I do not mean pedantic or unimaginative. Honesty is a form of sensitivity, and you need a very sensitive ear to detect in the verbose plays of Calderon "faintly audible, while this or the other is happening, the sinister drums of the unseen powers". Conrad defined art as "a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe", and Mr. Maugham here at the peak of his achievement as an artist renders it all the time. One may smile at the idea of Mr. Maugham doing one of Loyola's "Spiritual Exercises" and finding it extremely severe ("I thought I was going to be sick"), but it is that quality of honest experience which gives his style such vividness.

"Tarragone has a cathedral that is grey and austere, very plain, with immense, severe pillars; it is like a fortress; a place of worship for headstrong, violent and cruel men. The night falls early within its wall and then the columns in the aisles seem to squat down on themselves and darkness shrouds the Gothic arches. It terrifies you. It is like a dungeon. I was there last on a Holy Week and from the pulpit a preacher was delivering a Lenten sermon. Two or three naked electric globes threw a cold light that cut the outline of the columns against the darkness as though with scissors . . . Each angry, florid phrase was like a blow, and

one blow followed another with vicious insistence. From the farthest end of the majestic church, winding about the columns and curling round the groining of the arches, down the great austere nave and along the dungeon-like aisles, that rasping, shrewish voice pursued you”.

*Don Fernando* may be superficially discursive; Mr. Maugham is in turns critic, tourist, biographer (to find short lives as shrewd and amusing we must go back to Anthony a Wood and Aubrey), but he is working steadily forward towards the statement of his main argument: “It looks as though all the energy, all the originality, of this vigorous race had been disposed to one end and one end only, the creation of man. It is not in art that they excelled, they excelled in what is greater than art — in man”. To that man Mr. Maugham has rendered the highest kind of justice, whether he is the playwright of artificial situations or the unknown sailor who, when the Armenian bishop, Martyr, begged a passage, replied, “I will take him in my ship; but tell him that I go to range the universal sea”.

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## THE GENTLEMAN IN THE PARLOUR

CORDELL, Richard A.

*See page 107*

**T***he Gentleman in the Parlour* is one of the most charming of travel books. It was written in high spirits but with great care, for the author was as much concerned with style as with content. He says in his preface to the book, "If you like language for its own sake, if it amuses you to string words together in the order that most pleases you, so as to produce an effect of beauty, the essay or travel book gives you an opportunity. Here prose may be cultivated for its own sake". In *The Gentleman in the Parlour* he escapes the danger inherent in all exercises in style — florid passages, monotonous patterns and rhythms, undue subordination of matter to method. His prose is supple, lucid, pungent. It is rarely embroidered, never languorous. (Mr. Maugham has said that when he has finished an essay by Walter Pater he knows how a trout feels when he is taken off the hook and lies flapping on the grass.) His sentences have dignity but they are not pompous, and he skilfully adjusts the character and flow of his words and phrases to demands of the material — description, anecdote, reflection, or philosophy. *The Gentleman in the Parlour* is Mr. Maugham's favourite among his own books.

Somerset Maugham is well qualified to write good books of travel. He is a realist and indulges in no bogus enthusiasms. There is no fraudulent emotion about the mystery of the East. On the other hand *The Gentleman in the Parlour* is not a 'debunking' book of travel like *Innocents Abroad*, for Somerset Maugham not only shares Mark Twain's sincerity, but in addition possesses a great tolerance and a wide culture. That which would enrage Mark Twain amuses Somerset Maugham; he accepts, as far as humanly possible, life and

people on their own terms wherever he goes, and if he is confronted by mystery he cannot penetrate, he is not ashamed to be humble before it. Perhaps his best qualification (aside from the fact that he is an excellent writer) is that he has greater interest in people than in places. Few readers today can tolerate long descriptions of scenery, and rhapsodies over beauty in far-away places are extremely tiresome. In *The Gentleman in the Parlour* we never lose sight of the fact that Mandalay, Saigon, Haiphong, King Tung, and the jungle itself are real places where men and women live, work, eat, make love, suffer. "Then it seemed to me that in these countries of the East the most impressive, the most awe-inspiring monument of antiquity is neither temple, nor citadel, nor great wall, but man. The peasant with his immemorial usages belongs to an age far more ancient than Angkor Wat, the great wall of China, or the Pyramids of Egypt". Moreover the occasional companions of the author's travels are sharply and expertly drawn from life; they are as real and complete as the characters of *Cakes and Ale*.

The book is enlivened by a diversity of topics. Description, narration, fantasy, and philosophy are adroitly mixed to prevent monotony. There is a pleasant use of the unexpected. The book begins with a personal essay on Hazlitt (whose essay "On Going a Journey" provides the title of the book), a clever appraisal of Hazlitt and his more generally beloved contemporary Lamb. There are brief familiar essays on such subjects as imperialism, humour, solitaire, shyness, food, justification of evil, English prose, and love of mediocrity, and a half dozen narratives. He insists that he is a bad traveller, for he has little gift of surprise, and takes things for granted so very quickly that he is not struck by the unusual in his surroundings. "It seems to me just as natural to ride in a rickshaw as in a car, and to sit on the floor as on a chair . . . I travel because I like to move from place to place . . . it pleases me to be rid of ties, responsibilities, duties, I like the unknown; I meet odd people . . . I am often

tired of myself and I have a notion that by travel I can add to my personality and so change myself a little". Consequently the subject matter of his travel books is different from that of most such books. He is never condescending or patronizing in describing dress, food, religion, or manners of the natives. He has no eye for the merely quaint or picturesque and is not surprised by the abnormal, for he knows how rare the normal is. For example, in the account of his visit to a Buddhist monastery he mentions so casually that the monks smoked cheroots while chanting their prayers that the reader feels no surprise whatever.

The book ends with a remark by an odious, but generous and amusing Jewish commercial traveller: "I'll give you my opinion of the human race in a nutshell, brother; their heart's in the right place, but their head's a thoroughly inefficient organ".

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## THE MAUGHAM ENIGMA

COWLEY, Malcolm.

*See page 180*

There is a Somerset Maugham enigma, one that has always puzzled me. Why has he never written another book that was half so good as *Of Human Bondage*? Since 1897 he has been a professional writer, since 1907 a successful playwright, since 1916 a famous novelist. On the flyleaf of his latest book is a list of thirty-eight that preceded it – best-selling novels, short stories, travels, plays that were smash hits in London, New York, Berlin – and these are only the books he wants to remember; there are half a dozen others he is willing to forget. More than a collection of separate works, he has produced a unified body of work, an oeuvre, something that very few living writers have achieved in our language. Yet there has been a suspicion among critics that the oeuvre was artificial and the production of a second or a third-rate artist. The critics have usually been unjust to Maugham; they have neglected his great achievements as a craftsman. He has never fallen so low as Arnold Bennett at his worst or Sinclair Lewis at his third-best. Even when writing for the sort of public he despised, he was upheld by the strict morality of the prostitute who told him years ago that she was proud of always giving honest value. Still there were times when his heart wasn't in the work. Why did he write one book that was full of candour and human warmth? Why did he never climb back to the same level?

In *The Summing Up* he gives a partial and indirect but still a convincing answer to these questions. Of course that wasn't his aim in writing the book. Having reached the age of sixty-three, he wanted to take an inventory -- "to sort out my thoughts on the subjects that have chiefly interested me

during the course of my life". He didn't propose to write an autobiography or a book of confessions — "I have no desire to lay bare my heart, and I put limits to the intimacy that I wish the reader to enter upon with me". But without being frank, in the cant use of the word, he intended to be personal and completely truthful; and the result is the most interesting book he has published for twenty years. Incidentally it tells us a great deal about the sources and the psychological effects of his one great novel.

*Of Human Bondage* was written when Maugham was forty years old; his literary apprenticeship was over. He had learned four languages and studied masterpieces in all of them; he had worked to develop a prose style; he had written several novels, most of which were pure technical exercises; he had enjoyed the rare experience of having four plays running during a single London season. But in the midst of his success as a popular playwright, he began to be obsessed — the word is his own — by the teeming memories of his past life. "It all came back to me so pressingly, in my sleep, on my walks, when I was rehearsing plays, when I was at a party, it became such a burden to me that I made up my mind that I could only regain my peace by writing it all down in the form of a novel. I knew it would be a long one and I wanted to be undisturbed, so I refused the contracts managers were anxious to give me and temporarily retired from the stage".

Novels written after such an apprenticeship and out of such a necessity are almost certain to be good novels. But why didn't Maugham produce others of the same rank?

There are at least two answers and one of them is purely psychological. The clue to it lies in his use of the word 'obsessed'. Maugham was obsessed, haunted by the past — by his mother, kind and beautiful, who died when he was eight; by his lonely boyhood in the vicarage of Blackstable; by his schoolmates jeering at his stammer (which was the psychological equivalent of Philip Carey's clubfoot); by the

suffering humanity he saw at St. Thomas's Hospital; and finally, I should guess, by a love affair as prolonged and unhappy as Philip Carey's love for Mildred. He was under a compulsion to tell the whole story, to perform the rite of public confession and to receive absolution. "The book", he says, "did for me what I wanted, and when it was issued to the world . . . I found myself free forever from those pains and unhappy recollections. I put into it everything I then knew and having at last finished it, prepared to make a fresh start". He would never again return to the material that was closest to his heart.

But there is a second answer that lies in a field between the psychological and the social. The coldness and externality of Maugham's later novels was partly a result of his success — "the greatest danger that besets the professional author".

Success . . . often bears within itself the seed of destruction, for it may very well cut the author off from the material that was its occasion. He enters a new world. He is made much of. He must be almost superhuman if he is not captivated by the notice taken of him by the great and remains insensible to the attractions of beautiful women. He grows accustomed to another way of life . . . How difficult it is for him then to move freely still in the circles to which he has been accustomed and which have given him his subjects! His success has changed him in the eyes of his old associates and they are no longer at home with him. They may look upon him with envy or admiration, but no longer as one of themselves. The new world into which his success has brought him excites his admiration and he writes about it, but he sees it from the outside and can never so penetrate it as to become a part of it. No better example of his can be given than Arnold Bennett . . .

But Maugham himself is another example of the author separated by success from the circles that gave him his best subjects. They were not the upper-middle-class circles with which his later books have dealt. He was born into the upper

middle class — his father was solicitor for the British Embassy in Paris — and he will die in it too, but he has never felt at home with its members. Except in a few early plays like *Jack Straw*, he has always observed them as a faintly hostile stranger. His best subjects were the poor people he met when he was a down-at-the-heels medical student and a starving writer.

There is a story here with which his future biographer\* will have to struggle. My own idea is that when Maugham left Paris at the age of ten, an orphan speaking broken English — when he was neglected by his uncle the vicar and tormented by his schoolmates because of his timidity and his stammer — he became psychologically alienated not only from church and school but from his own class in English society. A few years later, at St. Thomas's Hospital, he met the people who lived in the Lambeth slums and all hostility vanished. Philip Carey had the same experience in *Of Human Bondage*; he found that "he was less shy with these people than he had ever been with others; he felt not exactly sympathy, for sympathy suggests condescension; but he felt at home with them".

At this point the path of the hero diverged from that of the novelist. Philip Carey fell violently in love with a waitress, lost her and married a seamstress instead. After becoming a doctor he chose to practise in a poor fishing village, partly because it was his first opening but also because he liked the people and they liked him in return. Somerset Maugham, as soon as his plays made money, bought a house in Mayfair, but only because he liked the neighbourhood as a symbol of success; he was irritated by the people. And that, I should guess, is the trouble with his work during the last twenty years. He has been writing stories — accurate and workmanlike and dramatic stories — about a class from which he has been spiritually alienated,

\*Mr. Maugham is not fond of the idea of a 'biography' of him and has requested his friends not to assist such a project in any way.

**SOMERSET MAUGHAM**

and about people with whom he doesn't care to live. One reads in his character an impulse toward generosity and fellow-feeling that he hasn't given himself much chance to display. The faintly disagreeable aftertaste in his books can be defined in half a dozen words. It is the milk of human kindness, half-soured.

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## AN EPICUREAN ON LIBERTY

### STRICTLY PERSONAL

KRUTCH, Joseph Wood. Author and critic, Brander Mathews Professor of Dramatic Literature, School of Journalism, Columbia University. Born in Knoxville, Tenn., 1893. Joined staff of *The Nation* as critic of drama, 1924, became an editor in 1935. Guggenheim Fellowship, 1930. Author: *Edgar Allen Poe: A Study in Genius*, 1926; *The Modern Temper*, 1929; *Comedy and Conscience after the Restoration*, 1934.

One sentence in Mr. Maugham's short book is already coming to be famous. No reader is likely to miss what leaps out of the usually rather diffuse text to catch the attention with its ring of classic finality. But quotation is inevitable: "If a nation values anything more than freedom, it will lose its freedom; and the irony of it is that if it is comfort or money that it values more, it will lose that too".

Now Mr. Maugham has never taken any pains to conceal the fact that he himself loves comfort, if not first then second, and, by implication at least, he confesses it again in this anecdotal account of how war overtook him at his Mediterranean villa. Indeed, those who are irritated by references, too frequent and too casual, to gardeners and footmen, yachts and dinner parties, may be irritated by the prominent part they play in a story which does, nevertheless, include the fall of France and the author's own far from luxurious voyage of twenty days from Cannes to a British port in a fearfully overcrowded collier. But it is just possible that they were included for a definite purpose, and whether they were or not, they do serve to emphasize the one thing which the author has to add to the analysis of an event already analyzed many times before.

So far as the fall of France is concerned, Mr. Maugham's anecdotes add up to the conclusions now generally accepted.

The army was ill-equipped, and the general staff rotten with jealous intrigue. The upper classes tended to feel that Hitler was preferable to Blum; the lower classes that this was not their war anyway. And if there were exceptions to this general rule, the exceptions were little disposed to risk their own lives. In the beginning there was optimism but no passion; "everyone you met was full of the defeats that were going to be inflicted on the Axis, but the boys were glad that they were too young to fight and the old men said they had fought in the last war and that was enough". The source of France's weakness went, in other words, even deeper than lack of idealism and of physical courage; it included a failure to recognize simple self-interest. Rightists on the one hand and leftists on the other had been oratorically declaiming that nothing could be worse than what they had for so long that they had come finally to believe it. They had, they insisted, nothing to lose, and if they had found out now just how wrong they were, it is too late for them to do anything about it.

And therein lies, perhaps, both the moral of Mr. Maugham's book and the justification for his continuing to write as he has always written. Heroes may or may not have been plentiful in the past, but they are obviously scarce in the modern world; and so are idealists. If we in America are lost unless a complacent and comfort-loving people can be transformed overnight into a race of knights errant, then we are probably lost already. It is extremely unlikely that capitalists are going to turn selfless and workers stop caring about higher wages without further ado. But if both could only realize how much each has still to lose, they might quite possibly get together for the duration.

Mr. Maugham, like most writing Englishmen today, assumes as a matter of course, that post-war England will be a very much more democratic country than it is at present. He seems, moreover, to be glad that it will. But that is not really the point. The moral is directed not at those who hope for a

JOSEPH KRUTCH

better world but at those who would really prefer this one or a worse. If you cannot love freedom in the abstract, you had better try to realize how many things you can lose by putting them first.

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## MR. MAUGHAM'S WORKSHOP

### A WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

MORGAN, Charles. Novelist and critic. Born in Kent, England, 1894. Dramatic critic of *The Times*, London, 1921-1939. Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. Author: *Portrait in a Mirror*, 1929; *The Fountain*, 1932; *Sparkenbroke*, 1936; *The Flashing Stream*, 1938; *The Voyage*, 1940; *The Empty Room*, 1941; *The House of Macmillan*, 1943; *Reflections in a Mirror*, 1944, 1946; *The Judge's Story*, 1947; *The River Line*, 1949.

Since he was eighteen Mr. Maugham has kept notebooks in which he has recorded emotions, ideas and observations of men and things which might afterwards be useful to him as a writer. Some of this material, already used in his books and plays, has been excluded from this volume; the rest appears in it. The result is fascinating in its variety, its candour and, sometimes, its self-repression.

The epigrams of callow youth in the early 'nineties, when the author was in fashionable revolt, have not been shut out. As the years pass, they appear less often and become less wilfully decorative, but the young man's eagerness to shock himself and the world continues surprisingly long. As late as 1901, when his age is twenty-seven, a careful and shrewd assessment of Matthew Arnold's style is followed by this:

"I'm glad I don't believe in God. When I look at the misery of the world and its bitterness, I think that no belief can be more ignoble".

The next year this note:

"Bed. No woman is worth more than a five<sup>pence</sup> unless you're in love with her. Then she is worth all she costs you".

This is the so-called 'cynicism' of the period, corresponding to the smartness of the chromium-plated or hard-boiled generation, two decades later. Almost at the same time, in a

comment on Jeremy Taylor, with whom he was by no means in complete sympathy, he could write: "One cannot turn a page without finding some felicitous expression, some new order of simple words which seems to give them a new value", and simplicity is the quality in Jeremy Taylor which most critics miss. Mr. Maugham saw it unerringly, and, being himself a writer by instinct, was not deterred by any differences of theological opinion from proclaiming it. This is why the book is valuable. It is what it says it is: a writer's notebook, not an ideology masquerading as criticism or an autobiography pretending to final wisdom.

It is interesting, in the first place, that Mr. Maugham should have kept these notebooks at all. For an imaginative writer, the method is of debatable value, and in his preface he debates it, fully aware of the danger that you may rely overmuch on your notes "and so lose the even and natural flow of your writing which comes from allowing the unconscious that full activity which is somewhat pompously known as 'inspiration'. But there is another danger which he does not speak of — namely, that the habitual note-taker may lose the even and natural flow, not of his writing only, but of his experience itself; he may become unable to resist a temptation to reach for a pencil while his lady's smile is still incomplete. And this tendency to see life in terms of art — though it will be despised as 'cold blooded' by those only who do not know what imaginative writing is -- can be perilous if the process of transmutation is too swift.

Experience, if given a chance, performs for an artist a miraculous pre-selection among his riches before submitting them to his conscious selectiveness. His notebook, if it becomes habitual and clamorous, may interfere with the miracle by demanding too much, too soon. Of this a writer of Mr. Maugham's quality is necessarily aware. Nevertheless, he had kept notebooks for nearly sixty years. The reason is the only good one: that for him the advantages were greater than the disadvantages. Vineyards are not uniform, nor are

their processes. His grape-juice of experience was best matured in this way. If he had been primarily a poet, if he had been nearer to Turgenev than to Flaubert, the balance might have swung the other way, but he is an analytical observer, and his notebooks were necessary to him as store-houses of material for analysis.

Scenes and people in the Pacific, in Russia, in India, in the United States; sketches of character, outlines of stories, passages of criticism, reflections in a host of subjects from the Absolute to the destiny of France: all are preserved with an admirable detachment, as if the writer had said to himself as each was put away, "Perhaps not, but one never knows the value of material until one has treated it". Nor is the material 'raw'. This is no scribbling of notes at random. Preliminary treatment has been applied. Some of the outlines are indeed such masterpieces of brevity that their own perfection may well have forbidden the development which was at first intended.

Mr. Maugham's 'self-repression' has been spoken of, and the words need to be explained. There is in his writing a quality which has been miscalled 'cynicism'. A cynic, by Wilde's definition, is "a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing", but a cynic is bleaker than that — he is one for whom the problem of values is boring or non-existent. For Mr. Maugham it is of perpetual interest; either directly, or, in his notes on religious subjects, indirectly, he continually reverts to it. "Though the turn of my mind", he says, "is concrete and my intelligence moves inactively among abstractions, I have a passion for metaphysics . . .". His self-repression consists in a refusal to allow that passion to have effect.

I do not wish to raise any question of agreement or disagreement with his interpretation of Epicureanism, but only to remark that his lucid and discerning mind, whenever it approaches the abstract, has a disconcerting habit of suddenly refusing a fence and swerving into irrelevance. For

example, he turns away from the concept of the Absolute Beauty by asking, "What sort of absolute is it that is affected by personal idiosyncrasy, training, fashion, habit, sex, and novelty?" The answer is that the absolute is not affected. Though we attain to the concept of it through our various and stumbling perceptions of things we call beautiful, its being is not in those things and is not diminished either by our ceasing to value them or even by their annihilation. The idea of Absolute Beauty may or may not be delusory; but it certainly cannot be invalidated by the destruction of Chartres cathedral or by our coming to think that the cathedral is ugly.

Mr. Maugham again refuses a fence in his discussions of the nature of the soul. Character, he has said, is the soul's sensible manifestation. Character is affected by the accidents of the body. Therefore, he argues, again confusing the idea with one of the things through which it may be apprehended, the soul must be affected by the accidents of the body; and he adds: "I find it then impossible to believe that the soul thus contingent on the accidents of the body can exist in separation from it. When you see the dead it can hardly fail to occur to you that they do look awfully dead". Something prevents him from seeing that his final sentence, far from clinching his argument, reopens it. Might it not be that a body looks 'awfully dead' precisely because the soul is separated from it?

The greater a reader's respect for Mr. Maugham, not as a master-craftsman only but as an artist, the stronger will his desire be to do more than cover this book with urbane compliments. He will be led, as I have been, to grapple with it in an attempt to discover that special tension which gives character and vitality to the author's work. This tension arises, I think, from a conflict between his "passion for metaphysics" and his determination not to give himself or his characters the benefit of the doubt. If he has an affectation or mannerism it is of ruthlessness. This is partly honesty and

SOMERSET MAUGHAM

courage, but partly fear. Fear of what? Of sentimentality? Of being duped? Of self-deception? Honourable fears, but still fears, and fears are conditions of the imagination which criticism too seldom attempts to understand. They run like a shudder across these pages. They are among the winds that drive Mr. Maugham's powerful ship.

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The following check-list of first editions makes no claim to completeness. A definitive bibliography of the writings of W. Somerset Maugham has been in preparation by the editor for about ten years. He will appreciate any information about research in progress and will be grateful to receive reprints of articles for the collection in the Center of Maugham Studies in New Brunswick, New Jersey, of which he is the founder and curator.

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